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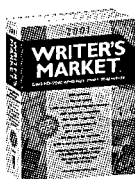
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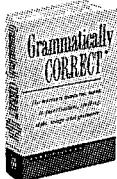
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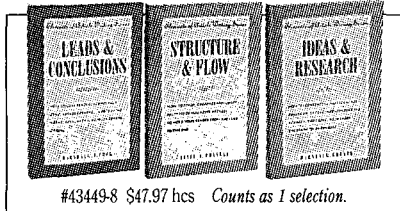
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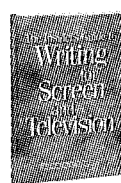
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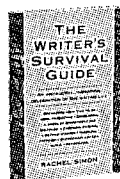
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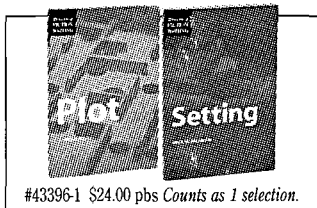
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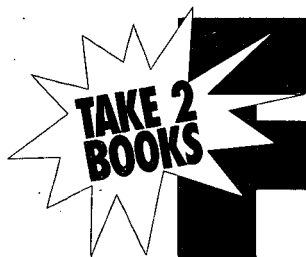
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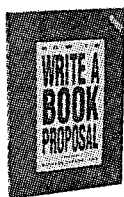
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EDITOR'S NOTES

Cathleen Jordan

DeLoris Stanton Forbes, author of stories for AHMM and dozens of mystery novels, has a new book out, *One Man Died on Base* (Five Star). "It's not really a baseball book, it is about a man who plays baseball," she tells us.

Welcome to Mat Coward, author of "The Dog's Route." Mr. Coward, a full-time writer, lives in England. His first novel, *Up and Down*, was published last year, also by Five Star; his second will be out in late 2001, followed by a short story collection; and he has an Edgar nomination for an EQMM tale.

"In my twenties," he says, "I led a fairly active life and found getting up for work in the mornings increasingly onerous. (I worked in public libraries at the time.) So I decided to find a way of earning a living which didn't involve mornings." About "The Dog's Route": "I've always been an admirer of

the pared down, economical, dialogue-driven style of crime writing which so many American writers excel at. My own writing tends to be denser, so with this story I de-



Photo by Jan White

liberately set out to write something fast and rather unadorned."

His website: <http://hometown.aol.co.uk/matcoward/myhomepage/newsletter.html>

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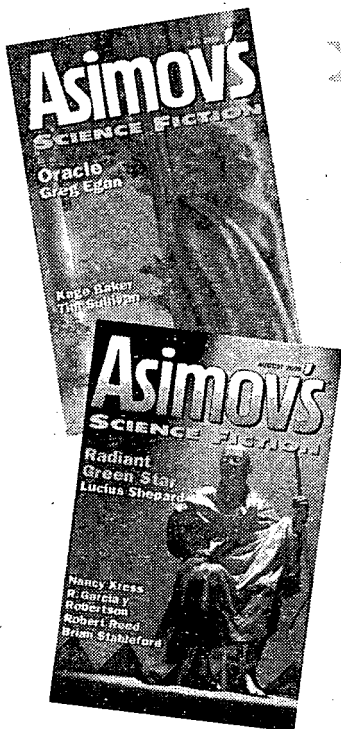
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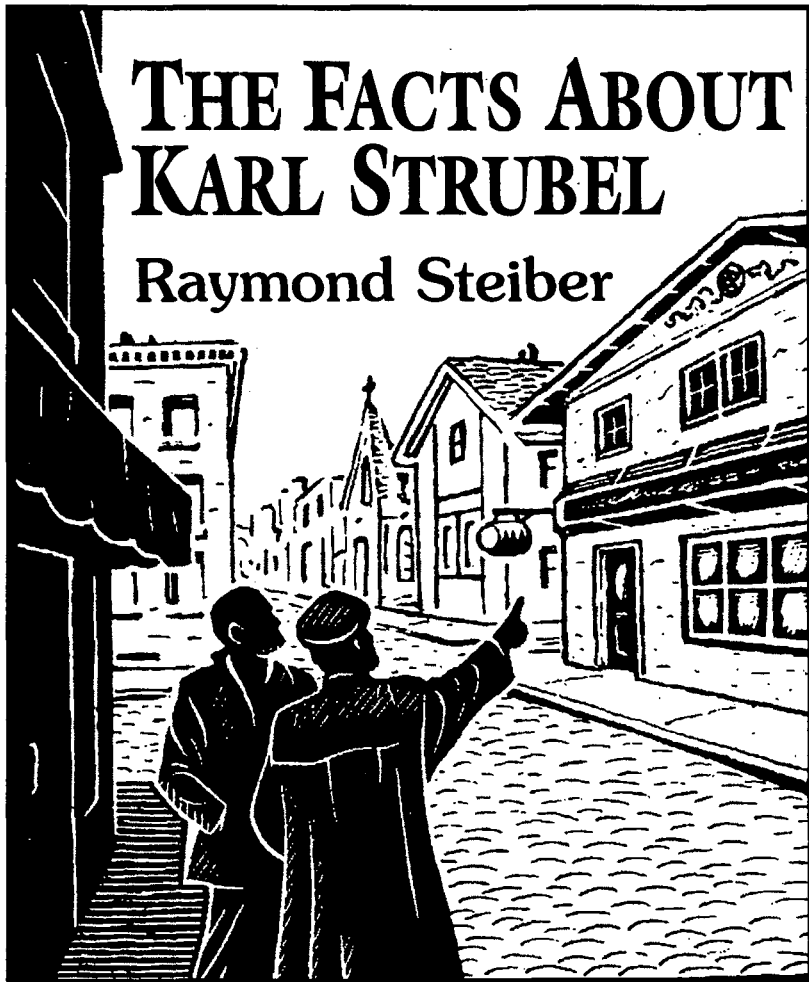
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THE FACTS ABOUT KARL STRUBEL

Raymond Steiber



We met Ledermann in a *gasthaus* halfway between Frankfurt and Darmstadt, me in a rumpled sportcoat and Leo dressed as elegantly as a prewar gentleman—which in many ways was exactly what he was. It was a rainy October night in 1961, and we'd driven there in my Triumph TR3, Leo with his bony knees drawn up and a pained ex-

pression on his face. He didn't like that Triumph. It sat close to the road and lacked too many creature comforts. A noble prewar saloon with a long, shiny hood—that would've been his idea. But since he didn't drive, he was stuck with my car.

Ledermann had his worn leather briefcase propped on an adjoining chair. He was a lawyer who special-

ized in cases involving American servicemen, particularly courts-martial. Military Justice is an even older oxymoron than Military Intelligence, and your average U.S. Army court-martial bears a strong resemblance to a kangaroo court. The officers who play judge and jury know exactly what verdict is expected of them, and in a spirit of backing up the commanding officer they usually deliver it. But all that goes out the window if a civilian lawyer is present. They have to play by the rules then or get in trouble themselves. Which meant that in the Germany of that time, where there were three hundred thousand American troops, most of them just out of high school and ready to raise hell, a lawyer who specialized in military cases could make a tidy living.

Ledermann drew a handful of documents from his briefcase. Earlier there'd probably been a sandwich in there and maybe a porcelain-stoppered bottle of beer to keep it company. The lawyer was a busy man and frequently ate on the run.

"My dear Leo," Ledermann said, "I'm sorry to have drawn you out on a night like this. I'm sure Michael could have handled this alone."

Leo raised a long-fingered hand and let it fall again. It was his way of saying *macht nicht*. It makes nothing.

"I've got a young sergeant accused of selling consignments of PX cigarettes on the black market. He's guilty as the devil, of course, but fortunately under American law I don't have to take that into consideration."

"What do you want us to do?"

"The chief witness against him is a man named Karl Strubel. He was the middleman in the operation, but the Amis worked out a deal with the civilian police and turned him. I need to get some dirt on him, make him look like a liar or worse. Maybe I could even make it appear that he set this boy up."

"And do you think that's what happened?"

Ledermann shrugged. "Only in the sense that he waved a handful of Deutschmarks in his face and told him where he could get more. But we're not dealing with reality here, Leo. We're dealing with a court-martial. And you know what this boy's likely to get—a dishonorable discharge at the least. Barely twenty-one and his life already ruined."

Leo raised a hand again. "We'll do what we can, advocate. Just the same, this work sometimes makes me feel like a Kaiserstrasse prostitute."

"Think of the boy, Leo. And as for Kaiserstrasse, we're both rather past it, wouldn't you say?"

Leo, who was in his mid-sixties, gave him a doleful look. "I am, at any rate."

Ledermann flipped some papers down on the table. "I haven't much on this Strubel. Just age, present address, and so forth."

"Did he serve in the war?"

"He admits to having been on the *Ostfront*."

Leo gave me a sidewise look. "Not very promising. Half the male population of Germany served on the Eastern Front."

"Except me," Ledermann said, "and you, of course."

Leo gave him a wintry smile. "Yes, but then my case was somewhat special, *nicht wahr?*"

He meant that he was a Jew and that he'd been on the run most of the war, mainly in France where he'd worked with the Resistance. Whereas Ledermann had served as a lowly private on the Atlantic Wall and somehow managed never to hear a shot fired in anger.

Ledermann snapped his briefcase shut.

"Now that we've taken care of that, would you care to join me in something to eat?"

"I would imagine the food here is quite plain."

"They do a very nice rumpsteak with onions."

"Exactly my point, advocate."

In the car I said, "Have you ever thought that you and Ledermann might've killed each other if you'd met during the war?"

"I have a great distaste for fire-arms—as you well know—so it would never have happened."

"Still—"

"We're friends now. And he was never one of those people—just a hapless draftee like so many others. Come to think of it, before you met me, you were a hapless draftee as well."

It was Ledermann who'd teamed us up. I'd been with the C.I.D., the criminal investigation arm of the U.S. Army, when Ledermann had approached me. A twenty-four-year old Spec/5 nearing the end of my tour of duty with no intention of reenlisting. I'd had dealings with

Ledermann before, which, given our different roles, had not always been pleasant.

"Look," he'd said, "you're just what's needed by fellows like me. An American who knows the insides of the U.S. military and has a criminal investigation background. I know a German national I can get to work with you. He served in the occupation government just after the war. He's not young, but with his knowledge of the German bureaucracy and yours of the Amis you'll make splendid partners."

"What do you get out of it, advocate?"

"Access to a fast action investigation team. The Amis don't give me much time to prepare for these courts-martial. And who do I have to find witnesses for me and dig up facts? Presently only a few fleabitten inquiry agents—tenth rate German Sam Spades!"

"Who's this partner you've dug up for me?"

"A fellow named Leo Stern. Not an easy man by any means but one of the best. Look, I'll be frank with you, I haven't even talked to Leo yet. The old fellow lost his wife a year ago. He hasn't many close friends any more, and he's been feeling rather low. Oh, he puts on a fine front—that's the Old World gentleman in him—but underneath—" he raised his shoulders. "This business will be good for him. He'll liven right up. And don't be surprised if he's rather clever at it."

"What is this? A reclamation project? I don't know if I like that."

"Call it self-interested altruism. My interests are served, Leo's in-

terests are served, and so will yours be, Sendjac."

At the time the dollar had been strong and the Deutschmark relatively weak, and a man could live very comfortably on a couple of hundred dollars a month. So I'd thought, what do I have to lose?

And now it was a year later and I was doing all right for myself. And as for Leo when I'd finally met him—well, not exactly a pussycat, but as advertised, very clever.

We had an office in a narrow street near the Eschenheimer Turm in Frankfurt. There was a creaky, cagelike elevator that Leo always used with a scowl on his face and a sad, doomed look in his eyes. Our office occupied an L-shaped alcove on the third floor and consisted of a tiny reception area with a larger room at the back. The room was cold in the winter, but in the spring and summer you could open the tall windows and catch the breeze from the small green park in the street behind.

When I came in the morning after our meeting with Ledermann, I found Leo already at work. He had removed his coat and placed bands around the cuffs of his shirt to protect them. If you've ever seen a telegrapher in an old movie, you'll get the picture.

He had the telephone to his ear and was making careful notes on a pad of paper with a fountain pen—he wouldn't touch a ballpoint.

"But if you'll only look in that particular archive, *gnädige Frau*, I'm sure you'll find what I want."

Leo seemed to know where every

file in West Germany was and how to get access to it. Part of that was his years in the occupation government, but the rest was simple application.

"Yes . . . yes . . . very good. And you're sure of the date? . . . By no means, *Frau Grote*. I trust you implicitly."

He put down the telephone and made a further note. "We'll send her flowers and a note of appreciation," he said. "She's middle-aged and stout and probably never receives any attention. The next time we need anything from that office, she'll leap to help us."

"You've met this woman?"

"Never. But one can tell from the voice."

"What if she's blonde, gorgeous, and twenty-five?"

"One never goes wrong sending flowers to a woman, Michael. Our friend Strubel, by the way, seems to be a very recent character."

I sat down on the edge of his desk. "What's that mean?"

"Only that there isn't a document on the man that bears a date more than a year old. Either he's a recent émigré from East Germany or he's just come out of the woodwork and needed to reconstruct his identity."

"Why don't we talk to him and find out?"

"An excellent idea. But let's talk to his most immediate acquaintances first."

Strubel lived above a bar in a blue collar district of the city. In 1945 this part of Frankfurt had been briefly fought over, and there were still pockmarks in the walls from small arms fire. You could see

the same sort of pockmarks on the *hauptbahnhof*, the main train station.

We canvassed the neighborhood, asking questions at the usual line-up of businesses, the *apotheke*, the *bäckerei*, the butcher's. If Strubel had ever entered any of them, nobody seemed to remember.

On the sidewalk Leo said, "At this rate we'll be at this task forever. Let's go directly to the source."

By which he meant the bar over which Strubel lived. It was called the *Fleischershöhle*—the butcher's cave. Apparently there'd once been a slaughterhouse in the vicinity. Leo ordered a small brandy, and I had a beer. Then Leo engaged the fat barman in conversation.

"We're looking for our good friend Karl Strubel."

The barman eyed us suspiciously. "Where would you know him from?"

"*Der Ost*. I was in the administration there. Nothing I'd want to talk about now, of course."

The barman leaned close. "Then you might as well know, some Jewish fellow's been making inquiries about him. He takes his calls here in the bar, and he got one this morning from an old comrade who works in some state office or other, a fellow who'd helped him out with his identity papers. He turned white as a sheet. Then he grabbed a few things from his room and left."

"This is very interesting."

"You know how these Jews are—they never forget what happened in the war."

Leo raised his Edward Teller-esque eyebrows. "Remarkable. And

what do you think he might have done in the east?"

"You'd know that better than I would, *nicht wahr*? But whatever it was it must have been serious to make him run like that." He grinned wolfishly. "That's what he gets for mixing with Americans. They don't forget either."

We finished our drinks and left the bar.

I said, "Somebody got nervous about the phone calls you were making this morning, Leo."

"Yes—and now we've learned more by accident than we would have by digging for a month. Let's see if there is an outside entrance that will take us upstairs."

There was a door a few steps down and beyond it a narrow vestibule and a set of steps leading upward.

"No numbers on the mailboxes," I said, "or names either. We'll just have to feel our way."

But it didn't turn out to be a problem. There was only one occupied room on the second floor. I tried the door. It was locked.

"What do you think, Michael?"

"Well, it's illegal, but it won't be much trouble."

I got my pocket knife out, and two minutes later we were inside the room. There wasn't much in there. An old iron bedstead with one of those German mattresses you can sink in up to your knees. A washstand with a pewter mug and basin. A locked wardrobe. I got out my knife again and looked inside.

"Looks like he left most of his clothes behind," I said. "That means he'll be back."

"But perhaps not soon. What's in that burlap sack down below?"

I opened it up, then shook my head. "Unwashed turnips. Strubel must've been to the market recently—although what he wants with a bunch of turnips is beyond me."

"And on the shelf above?"

"Cigarettes. A couple of cartons of American cigarettes."

"And underneath the bed, as you'll notice, crusts of mud."

"What're you doing, Leo? Turning Sherlock Holmes on me?"

"Sherlock Holmes never had the advantage of fingerprints. There's a used water glass on the washstand. Find something to wrap it in, and we'll depart the premises."

While I was doing that, Leo discovered a photograph in a drawer. It showed a stubble-haired man in a military uniform sitting in a bar somewhere. He had a bottle of liquor in one hand and a handful of female flesh in the other. The woman the flesh belonged to was blonde and buxom and had the knowing eyes of a professional.

"*Souvenir de guerre*," Leo said.

"Well, at least he's got a face you won't forget."

"If he hasn't changed it."

We reloked the door and got out of there.

At eight the next evening a black Mercedes sedan pulled to a discreet halt on the street near our office. Two men climbed out, both wearing fedoras and long overcoats. They each had graying blond hair, and if there was a difference between them, it was that the shorter and squatter of the two looked as if he

would've been more comfortable in a uniform—preferably with a truncheon tucked under his arm. A few minutes later they were sitting in our office, and the air was thick with cigar and cigarette smoke.

The more elegant of the pair, a Pole named Strylski, was an old friend of Leo's from before the war. He was currently a functionary at the Polish consulate, and the second man, who said nothing directly to us the entire evening, was his minder.

Leo dispensed with formalities and got right to the point. "My dear Jerzy, were the glass and the photograph any help?"

"Fortunately—or unfortunately, depending on your view of the complications that arise—yes. The face in the photograph and the fingerprints on the glass belong to a man named Karl Heidler. He was in charge of a massacre of Polish citizens early in the war. There were witnesses and, thanks to German thoroughness, extensive documentation."

"Then you'd like to have him back."

"As of tomorrow it will be a matter between my government and the West Germans."

"Which means that it may take years. But what if something quicker could be arranged?"

"I'm open to suggestions." He glanced sidewise at his companion. "But only suggestions."

"You understand that I have no sympathy for this man and that I know precisely who you mean by Polish citizens."

"The present Polish government

resists the idea that any special class of person suffered during the war—other, of course, than good communists.”

“My dear Jerzy, your government can resist any idea it chooses. It’s run by a group of embalmed toads who do the will of those warts in Moscow. But you do have rather efficient firing squads. Suppose we could deliver this man to you on the quiet. Do you think you could spirit him out of the country?”

Strylski pursed his lips. That was as far as he would go.

“Let me put it another way. Tomorrow night at, say, nine o’clock I will make a telephone call to any number you provide. I will give the person who answers a location where he’s to be in one hour’s time. It would then be up to that person to arrive there in a motorcar with a sufficiently capacious trunk.”

Strylski conferred a moment in Polish with his companion. Then he turned back to us.

“My colleague thinks that would be a most satisfactory arrangement.”

Leo got out a bottle of brandy, and we drank to the success of our joint venture.

As he was putting on his coat, Strylski said, “I wonder that you came back here, Leo.”

“To Frankfurt, you mean? Germany?”

“After all that happened here . . .”

“And where should I have gone? To America, where my sister now lives? What, please, would I have done there? And as for Israel, can you really see me coaxing life from the dust of some *kibbutz* with a re-

volver on my hip? No, whether I like it or not, I’m a German. And whether anybody else likes it either.”

Strylski shook his head. “Ah, Leo, better you among all these terrible memories than me.”

We saw them to the elevator and watched it clank into the darkness below.

I said, “You’ve left us with a hell of a problem, Leo. How do we find Strubel before nine o’clock tomorrow night?”

“We look in the right place.”

“Sure, but where the hell’s that?”

“He left in muddy shoes.”

“The crusts of mud under the bed. Big deal.”

“And there was a sack of unwashed turnips in the wardrobe. Add to that the duplicate we made of the photograph, and if you need any more, well, my dear Michael, I despair of your future as a detective, private or otherwise.”

It took a morning and a part of an afternoon, but Leo was dead right. All we needed were the photograph and what the sack of turnips and the pair of muddy shoes told us. And also, at the back of it, the knowledge that Strubel was a receiver of stolen American cigarettes and the type of place where that was best carried out.

If you were an American G.I., you saw them all the time as you traversed the main north-south Frankfurt autobahn. Little garden plots in the wasteland at the bottom of the bank on which the autobahn ran, the biggest no larger than an American lot and most

much smaller. Weekend gardeners from the concrete and cobblestone vaults of the city used them to raise their own flowers and vegetables. Call them a back yard plot for people who had no back yards. And each of them had its own little shed for storing seeds and pots and gardening tools.

"You see the advantage," Leo said. "There's a constant parade of U.S. military vehicles on the autobahn. One of the vehicles pulls off into the breakdown lane after nightfall. In the space of a few minutes boxes of American cigarettes and whisky, perhaps even automobile tires, are pitched down the bank. The truck leaves. The contraband disappears into a garden shed, and any marks left behind are taken care of with a rake. A half hour later there's nothing to show that anything happened."

"What if he hasn't gone to ground in his shed?" I asked.

"He'll be there. Depend on it, Michael. This time of year it's the best place for him. There'll be no one working the neighboring plots to disturb him."

We asked here and there, showing the photograph. Our cover story was that Leo was looking for the man who'd defrauded his elder sister. The police were no help at all, but perhaps if we located him on our own they'd be willing to act. The story fit Leo's conception of the perfect lie in that it contained no grain of truth at all.

At last we asked the right man. He was loading gardening tools into the back of an old DMW. We showed him the photograph, and

he pointed a finger at an allotment half a block away. It had a shed that was larger than the rest in the area.

"He won't be there now, of course," the man said. "You'll have to wait for the weekend."

The man drove off.

We stood gazing at the shed. I said, "I guess we'd better make sure, Leo."

"Better we leave it for tonight and don't scare him off in the meantime."

That made sense, I suppose, but I still didn't like it. It was leaving a lot to the last minute. And particularly with a bunch of Polish communists involved, something else I didn't like, that lot could leave us in a hell of a mess.

We drove back to the office in my Triumph. We ate a leisurely meal at a nearby restaurant. By nine we were back near the allotment, and Leo was making his telephone call. Our plan was to let the Poles do the dirty work. We'd just keep an eye on the place till they arrived and then make like disinterested observers.

"The door's on the autobahn side," I said. "We'll have to go right up to the place to keep watch on it. Ah look, Leo, this is something I can handle alone. Why don't you wait in the car."

"With this gentleman, Michael, I want to be in on the kill—if only to see the look on his face when he realizes what's happening to him."

We trudged up the path that led to Strubel's shed. Except for the headlights on the autobahn the area was very dark, and a light rain

had begun to fall. We came in sight of the door and saw a thin crack of light around the edge of it. We heard music, too, the faint lilt of country-and-western, of all things. Somebody inside was listening to AFN, the armed forces' radio network. "I told you he'd be here," Leo whispered. "We'll need a flashlight to signal Strylski when he comes."

"You should've said something. I'll have to go back to the car for it."

"I'll wait under the eaves at the back of the shed."

"That's not such a good idea, Leo."

"Ach, on a night like this he won't hear a thing."

To save time I cut directly across the allotment—a mistake because I quickly discovered where all the mud under Strubel's bed had come from. It squished around my ankles like a kind of viscous stew and slowed me down more than taking the path would have. Finally I reached the street. I'd left the car unlocked, so I didn't have to waste time fishing for my keys. Even so, I had a tense feeling in my stomach as I hurried back toward the shed with the flashlight. A lot more time had passed than I'd counted on. I should've made Leo come with me, I thought.

Disaster comes two ways—totally unannounced or preceded by a long foreboding. This one came with a little of both. I got back to the vicinity of the shed. The country-and-western music had stopped, and now there was only the hiss of the rain. The man inside had heard something. He'd turned down the radio to make sure. That was the way I put it together.

I swung around the side of the shed. No sign of Leo. He'd disappeared.

Then I heard them—inside the shed.

"What were you doing out there?"

"My dear Strubel, there's no need to point a firearm at me."

A clunk in the pit of my stomach. He had Leo in there. He had a pistol. And what did I have but a lousy flashlight?

"You're the one who's been hounding me. The one Georg warned me about. Do you think I don't know a Jew when I see one?"

"Of course I've been searching for you. I'm acting on behalf of a lawyer named Ledermann. He represents this American sergeant you were involved with."

"How did you get on to me so quickly? That's what I want to know. I've only been back since December."

"Please calm yourself. I'm only here about this American boy. If you could see your way clear to change your testimony, I'm sure Ledermann would offer compensation."

Leo was bluffing like a champion, but I doubted that he'd get very far with Strubel. And Strubel's next words confirmed that notion.

"Georg said he knew you. He said you'd helped gather evidence against our friends after the war. And now you've come for me!"

"That was long ago when I served in the occupation government."

"Yes—long ago. But this is right now, Herr Stern."

My gut said do something. Do it right now! I raised my fists and pounded them against the wall of the shed. A curse from inside. Then blackness as Strubel doused the lights. I ran around to the door side of the shed. I planted the flashlight in the mud on the far right and flicked it on. Then I flattened myself against the wall on the left-hand side of the door.

Just in time. Strubel flung open the door. The flashlight beam caught his brutal face and the thin stubble on top of his head. It also caught the oily metal of the pistol in his hand. He swung toward the light, ready to fire. And that was when I drove my left fist full force into the side of his jaw. He went down like a sack of turnips.

Leo flicked the interior lights back on. I dragged Strubel's inert body inside. Then I went back for the pistol and the flashlight.

"You took long enough," Leo said. "I was running out of blather. Better late than never, however."

"We were lucky. He had a glass jaw."

Leo took a roll of surgical tape out of his coat pocket. "This is just the ticket. We used it to good effect in the Resistance."

Trust Leo to come prepared.

I pulled Strubel's wrists behind his back and used the tape on them. Then I bound his ankles.

"Put some across his mouth," Leo

said. "I've heard all from the gentleman tonight that I care to."

By the time I finished Leo was standing in the doorway lighting a cigar. He normally rationed himself to one a day, after dinner with his brandy. But apparently tonight was a special occasion.

"This has worked out rather splendidly," he said. "Herr Strubel, Heidler, whatever he chooses to call himself will experience a little rough justice at the hands of the Polish government—a correct if somewhat sketchy trial followed by a quick execution. As for our young sergeant, with no witnesses against him the Americans will have to drop all charges. Ledermann will be pleased. Ah, I think I see a pair of headlights in the roadway. Either someone is stealing your car—a fate for it much to be desired—or our Polish friends have arrived."

I stepped outside and gave a signal with the flashlight. The car pulled to a stop, and I saw a pair of figures emerge.

Leo had found a box of contraband cigarettes in the shed. Now he came up beside me with a couple of cartons under his arm.

"We'll give these to Strylski's colleague. Then the next time we need anything from him—"

"I know," I said wryly. "He'll leap to help us."

Leo cast a sidewise glance at me. "My dear Michael, you're learning."

FICTION

THE DOG'S ROUTE

Mat Coward



Illustration by Hank Blaustein

Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine 6/01

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She sighed as if used to dealing with idiots, and said, "Not *find*. He isn't lost. I said *follow*."

"You want me to follow your dog?"

"Thank you, Mr. Walker, yes. *Follow*." She sighed again. It was quite sexy, actually, though she was about as old as my mother. My mother, however, doesn't wear so much perfume and has never painted her lips quite such a shade of blood red. Anyway, my mother is a primary school teacher, and I could tell the moment she walked into my office that Kirsty Honeywell wasn't a primary school teacher.

"I understand, Miss Honeywell. It's just quite an unusual request. In fact, in all my time as a private detective, I'm sure I have never been asked to follow a dog before."

"And how long have you been a private detective, Mr. Walker?"

"Nine and a half months."

"Oh. You started straight from school?"

I sighed, but I did it silently. "Not quite. I'm older than I look." This is true. I'm twenty-three, but I look about sixteen. I often have trouble getting served in pubs.

Miss Honeywell leaned back in her chair and studied me. Her eyes moved from my face down across my chest and along my arms. I could feel my bloodflow tracking her gaze.

"Have you tried wearing your hair shorter?"

"Miss Honeywell, I've tried wearing it shorter and longer and having it all shaved off. I even tried wearing a collar and tie once."

"Oh well. Believe me, one day you'll be glad to look younger than you are."

I took a pound coin out of my pocket and transferred it to a jar on my desk. A large jar, which was almost full of pound coins.

"What's your dog's name?" I asked. "Rover?"

"Bing. He's a crossbreed."

She handed me a photo of a medium-sized hairy mongrel.

"I used to be married. Bing remains; the husband does not. When I acquired Bing, I only worked part-time. For the past three years I've been working fulltime, very full, and so, during weekdays, I leave the dog flap open. This allows Bing to come and go as he pleases. Please don't lecture me on this, Mr. Walker. I know it's irresponsible, and possibly illegal, but he's my dog and that's how things are."

"Fine."

"Recently I changed my working pattern. I now spend one day a week at home. Usually Tuesday."

"Tuesday," I said, and wrote Tuesday down in my notebook.

"I've discovered that it is Bing's habit to leave the house via the dog flap at eight thirty on weekday mornings—he does this when I am at home, so I assume he does it when I'm not—and to return, via the dog flap, at five thirty. He doesn't do it on weekends because he and I spend weekends together."

"I see. And you want to know where he goes."

"Where, and perhaps even why."

"Because you're curious," I said.

"Because," said Miss Honeywell, "he is my dog."

I arrived early, just in case, but it wasn't necessary. Kirsty Honeywell left her house at eight oh-three, and at eight thirty the dog flap flapped and out came Bing. On reaching the front gate he sniffed both ways, then trotted off to the left. I fired up my moped and followed.

Our first stop was a phone box in an alley off the high street. Bing walked straight up to it, barked at it twice, and then sat down in front of it. After four minutes of sitting he went down on his belly. Still he kept his eyes fixed on the pay phone.

That was how we passed the next seven minutes until a door opened in the alley and an elderly Chinese woman leaned out, looked at the phone box, and whistled. Bing scrambled to his feet—his efforts to get up in a hurry undermined by the uncontrolled wagging of his long tail—and waddled over to the woman. She made a fuss of him for a little while, and he made a fuss of her, and then, holding Bing back with one hand, the woman reached into the room behind her with her spare hand and produced a large plastic washing-up bowl.

Giving the dog one last vigorous pat on the back, the old woman retreated into the room and shut the door behind her. Bing, his snout noisily immersed in the contents of the washing-up bowl, took no notice of me as I crept close enough to smell, and finally to see, those same contents.

Lumps of pork, chunks of chicken, slices of bamboo, rounds of water chestnut, conglomerations of rice, swirls of dark, aromatic sauce.

It took Bing less than a minute to finish his meal, after which he gave his nose a few licks before setting off back to the high street. He held his tail high, which made him easier for me to follow as I pushed my moped along the pavement behind him.

When we came to the tube station, Bing walked in and straight over to the ticket kiosk. There were two passengers ahead of him in line, so he queued patiently behind them until his turn came. By standing on his hind legs he was just able to bring the tip of his snout level with the ticket window. Either this or his barking alerted the occupant of the kiosk to Bing's presence, and a small door marked STAFF ONLY opened. The dog passed through it.

All this I watched from just outside the station. I didn't think they allowed mopeds on the Underground, and besides—how would I get the bike down the escalator?

I took advantage of the lull to drink some tea from my Thermos flask and eat a slice of my grandmother's cherry and almond fruit-cake. Half an hour later I double-locked my moped and made a dash for the public lavatories on the other side of the road. Often, on watching jobs, I use a widemouthed bottle, but that was hardly practical on this occasion.

When I returned to my position, I needed to be sure Bing was still in the ticket kiosk. If I didn't check, I could be waiting there until midnight for a long-gone dog, and I hadn't brought that much cake.

Bending my knees and walking

like Groucho Marx, or maybe Chuck Berry, I approached the ticket window beneath its occupant's line of sight. After a quick look around to make sure no one was observing my eccentric behavior, I popped my head up just long enough to peep through the window. There was Bing—asleep on a hairy blanket in a large cardboard box by a radiator. I popped down again and resumed my watch.

A further two hours passed, quite slowly.

At thirty-five minutes past eleven the staff door opened again, and out came Bing. I was glad to see him until I realized that he wasn't heading towards me—but away from me, towards the escalator.

The dog was catching a train.

I ran into the station just in time to see him pottering onto the northbound platform.

The next day I skipped the early start and the Chinese throwaway and went straight to the tube station—on foot. I bought a ticket, and at eleven thirty-five I was sitting on a bench on the northbound platform reading a music magazine when Bing appeared. Two minutes later a train pulled in. Bing got on, and so did I—though I chose a carriage several yards downwind of the dog in case he recognized me from the previous day.

Four stops up the line we got off. I surrendered my ticket at the barrier; Bing did not. We exited the station into another high street, which looked very similar to the one we'd been in yesterday. Five minutes later we paused outside a

bistro, against the wall of which Bing cocked his leg. Next to the restaurant was a pedestrian crossing. Bing stood beneath the amber light, barking. A few cars went by, but eventually one stopped and waved him across.

As I watched Bing march into the fire station opposite the bistro, I settled onto a bench and got out my Thermos and lunchbox. I had a feeling this was going to be another long wait, and I wasn't wrong.

Hours passed, but only in order to make way for more hours. By the time Bing emerged from the fire station (noticeably fatter, it seemed to me), my watch read a quarter to five. The timetable at the bus stop outside the bistro promised a four forty-seven service, but it didn't arrive until four fifty-nine. Bing didn't seem to mind; he was an even-tempered commuter.

The bus took us to the bottom of Kirsty Honeywell's road. We alighted, and I watched as Bing dragged his bottom back through the dog flap, his day's work done.

On the third day of my investigation I called at the Chinese takeaway ten minutes after Bing had left. My buzz on the delivery door entry phone was answered by the old woman herself.

"Hello there, sorry to bother you so early. My name's Keith Walker, and I was wondering if I could ask you a few questions about the dog you were feeding just now?"

The old woman gave me a not-undirty look and slammed the door in my face. I wondered what I'd said.

The door opened again, to reveal a Chinese girl of about my own age. She was rather attractive; she was short and she had breasts and hair. She wasn't smiling, but she looked as if she could if she wanted to.

"Can I just say," she said, "that I don't despise you? I pity you."

"I . . . thank you," I said.

"I overheard you asking my grandmother about a dog in our restaurant. My grandmother doesn't speak much English, but even she has heard all the jokes about dogs being served up in Chinese restaurants. This is how you get your kicks? Making fun of people because of where they come from? I feel sorry for you, and that's the truth. I sincerely hope that one day you will have more in your life than this and that you will come to see how you are imprisoned by your own stupid prejudices. But in the meantime please bugger off, and if I see you around here again, I will call the police."

I thought of trying to explain, but I didn't want to get the old woman in trouble with her granddaughter, who obviously didn't know about Bing's brunch. So instead I said, "You know, you're absolutely right. I'm going to mend my ways in future, I swear I am. I'm grateful to you for your kindness."

Then I got on my moped and left as quickly as I could.

I had more luck with the ticket clerk at the tube station, and with a firefighter called Ted, and with a bus driver called Obo. They all knew Bing, and all agreed that his routine was more or less unvarying, five days a week. The ticket

clerk and one of the fireman's mates reckoned that the dog's visits had been going on for round about three years.

The next day was a Saturday, and mostly out of curiosity I once more sat upon my moped a discreet distance from Miss Honeywell's house. At nine thirty a smart car stopped outside the house and sounded its horn. A tall, handsome man in expensive casual clothes got out of the car and leant against its bonnet. He was soon joined by Kirsty and Bing. Kirsty and the man kissed, quite passionately, while Bing barked and wagged his tail. Then all three got into the smart car and drove off.

I didn't follow them. I assumed Miss Honeywell didn't want to pay me to follow her dog while she was actually with it. I rode over to the main reference library and asked to see a run of local newspapers from about three years ago.

"Police say fears are growing for a local man who disappeared after setting out to walk his dog in Jubilee Park last week," I read, following a brief search. "Oliver Honeywell, 34, an accountant, has not been seen since . . ."

The story was on the front page that week and on an inside page the next week and nowhere in subsequent weeks. I made some photocopies and thought about things.

Oliver worked from home. It was his habit, according to his worried wife Kirsty ("I am bracing myself for bad news, though I hope and pray he will come home"), to walk his dog Bing in the local park twice a day. On the day in question

Kirsty was out at her part-time job. When she returned home, Bing was sitting on the sofa, wearing his collar and lead, but of Oliver there was no sign. As far as I could discover from the newspapers, there never was any sign of him from that day forward.

I thought about that, and I thought about Bing.

Dogs often go wandering, and dogs like routines. I knew that much about dogs. But what event triggered this particular routine in this particular dog? Was it connected to the disappearance of my client's husband—a client who now seemed so happy with her smart-car boyfriend?

If Bing, the tragic and faithful hound, were conducting a daily search for his lost master, then logically he ought to be doing it in the park, the scene of their walks together. The fact that he wasn't suggested that he knew something the rest of us—me, the local paper, the police—didn't know. Something Kirsty Honeywell might or might not know.

Unless Bing were psychic (in which case he'd have known I was following him, surely), he must have traveled his route at least once accompanied by a human. Else, how would he know which tube station to get off at, which bus to catch?

I left the library, got back on my moped, and rode the dog's route once more.

Oliver Honeywell would come out his front door, and instead of turning right towards the park he would turn left towards the high

street. At least, that's what he'd do on the days when his wife was out at work. First stop, the Chinese takeaway.

No, *not* the takeaway, I told myself. To be strictly accurate, Bing's first stop was the phone booth. There, presumably, Oliver would ring someone, perhaps to arrange a meeting. Perhaps to find out if the coast were clear. The Chinese brunch was part of the dog's routine, not the man's. Sometime *since* Oliver's disappearance the kind old Chinese granny had taken pity on a poor dog keeping vigil by a lonely pay phone and had offered it a feed of leftovers from her son's kitchen.

Once I'd figured out the essentially dualistic nature of the route—that there were in fact two routes, one laid on top of the other—the rest of the journey made sense. Catching the tube was Man; taking a nap by the ticket clerk's fire was Dog. Scrounging yet another free bed-and-board at the fire station was Dog; keeping an appointment near the fire station was Man. Over the months Bing had incorporated these extra bits into his routine until eventually the original purpose of the daily trek—recreating his master's final footsteps in the hope of catching up with him—had receded in the dog's memory, and the "extras" had become the purpose.

Could be. That's more or less how religions get invented, after all.

The fire station appeared to be the farthest point of the journey—from there it was straight home to

the dog flap—so whatever Oliver Honeywell's secret life was, it happened near the fire station.

I rode out there, and of course the first thing I saw was the bistro. It was called Leanora's, and inside I found Leanora chalking menus.

"Yes," she said when I showed her the photo of Oliver I'd photocopied from the newspaper, "I do remember him—he used to come in here with his wife two or three lunchtimes a week. Always lunchtimes, never evenings. He always paid in cash, never by credit card, that's why I remember him. But he hasn't been in here for years."

"Could you describe his wife?"

Leanora shrugged. "She had red hair. Quite a bit younger than he. Why are you asking? Nothing's happened to him, has it?"

"Bound to have," I said. "Things happen to all of us, don't they?"

That evening, I phoned my client. I had an idea, but I had to be sure before I took it any further.

"Kirsty Honeywell." She sounded slightly drunk.

"Miss Honeywell, this is Keith Walker."

"Why do people who are trying to sell you something always tell you their names? Why are you supposed to care?"

"I'm not a cold caller, Miss Honeywell, I'm the private detective you hired to follow your dog."

She giggled. Then she laughed so much she had to put the phone down for a minute. "I'm sorry," she said, still spluttering. "But when you put it like that, it really does sound almost too silly for words, doesn't it?"

"May I ask you something?"

"The answer's no."

"No?"

"No," she said. "Your crooked nose won't put girls off. It adds character, and a lot of girls go for character. Personally, I go for good looks, but there you are—not everyone can afford to be so choosy."

"Right, thanks," I said. "That's very useful." I wrote it all down in my notebook. "Can I ask you something else?"

I heard ice cubes clink as she said, "Listen, sweetie, if it's about the ears, that might be better coming from your mother."

"Did you and your husband ever have lunch together at a bistro called Leanora's?"

There was a pause before, enunciating very clearly, she replied. "No. Never. Neither lunch nor any other meal."

"Thank you. That's all." I went off to look at my nose in a mirror.

I went back to the library, and reread every word about Oliver's disappearance. Not only was there no mention of Oliver's extra-marital affair as a possible motive for his involuntary vanishing, there was no hint that foul play was even suspected. Certainly, there was no report of his wife's having been formally questioned by the police.

I phoned my cousin Fraser, who was a detective constable. I told him about Oliver's disappearance three years ago, about the secret rendezvouses at Leanora's bistro, and that Leanora was still in situ and would be able to confirm that

Oliver and an unknown woman had been regular diners there.

"It's not my division," said Fraser.

"They let you use the phones, don't they? You can call the appropriate office? All I'm saying is that this seems to be new evidence, which on the face of it would justify reactivating a dormant case."

Fraser thought about that for a while. He was always an overly deliberate thinker, even when we were kids. Playing Snap with him was a torment. Eventually, he said, "Yeah, fair enough, Keith. I'll make a phone call. How did you find all this out, by the way, about this bloke's affair? In case they ask about my source."

"Simple," I said. "I followed his dog."

Five days later Kirsty Honeywell came into my office without knocking.

"You seem surprised to see me," she said, sitting down without asking. "Why would that be?"

"Well, to put it bluntly, I assumed you might be under arrest by now."

"Gosh," she said. "That is blunt. That would be why you didn't bother sending me a bill? Never mind, I'm here now to pay you what I owe you. And to give you a special bonus."

"Bonus? After I told the police about your motive for murdering your husband?"

She waved that away with her slim, elegant fingers and her short, chewed nails. "I didn't know about his affair. Well, not that one anyway. And I didn't know he'd been mur-

dered. I sort of hoped he had, in my darker moments, but I didn't actually know."

"But you do now?"

She nodded. "Looks like it. The cops told me this morning that they've found a body. In the garden of his mistress's house—they got onto her through that Leanora woman. She lived only a couple of streets away from the bistro."

"So the mistress killed him?" I blush easily, I'm aware of this, and I could feel the beginnings of a big blush coming on now. This situation was somewhere beyond embarrassing.

"No, more likely her husband did. Oliver and his mistress went from the bistro to her bed, the hubby came home unexpectedly, and their affair dissolved in a morass of blood and clichés." While I was still taking that in, she added, "I understand the police are still digging. They expect to find a female corpse to go with the male one."

"Oh," I said, and could manage no more.

"Did you not pause to wonder why, if I knew where Oliver's body was, I would hire you to follow Bing right to it?"

"Actually . . . actually, no, I didn't." My blush deepened.

"Oh, you know, Mr. Walker, you're really almost sweet."

I took a fifty pence piece from my pocket and transferred it to a jar on my desk.

"The truth is," my client continued, "in the back of my mind I half thought that Bing's daily roving might be connected with the fate of my husband. But that was some-

thing I was never quite strong enough to think about with the front of my mind. We play games with ourselves, you know—people. Women, especially. Well, perhaps you'll understand that better when you're a bit older."

She took a completed check out of her handbag and passed it over to me. "That will cover it, I hope?"

"More than," I said. "Thank you."

She stood up. "And I mustn't forget your bonus. You see, thanks to you and your excellent, if slightly misdirected detecting, my husband is no longer missing—he's officially dead. Which means, as soon as the bureaucracy's satisfied, that I'll be able to remarry. And believe me,

this one I'm going to keep an eye on."

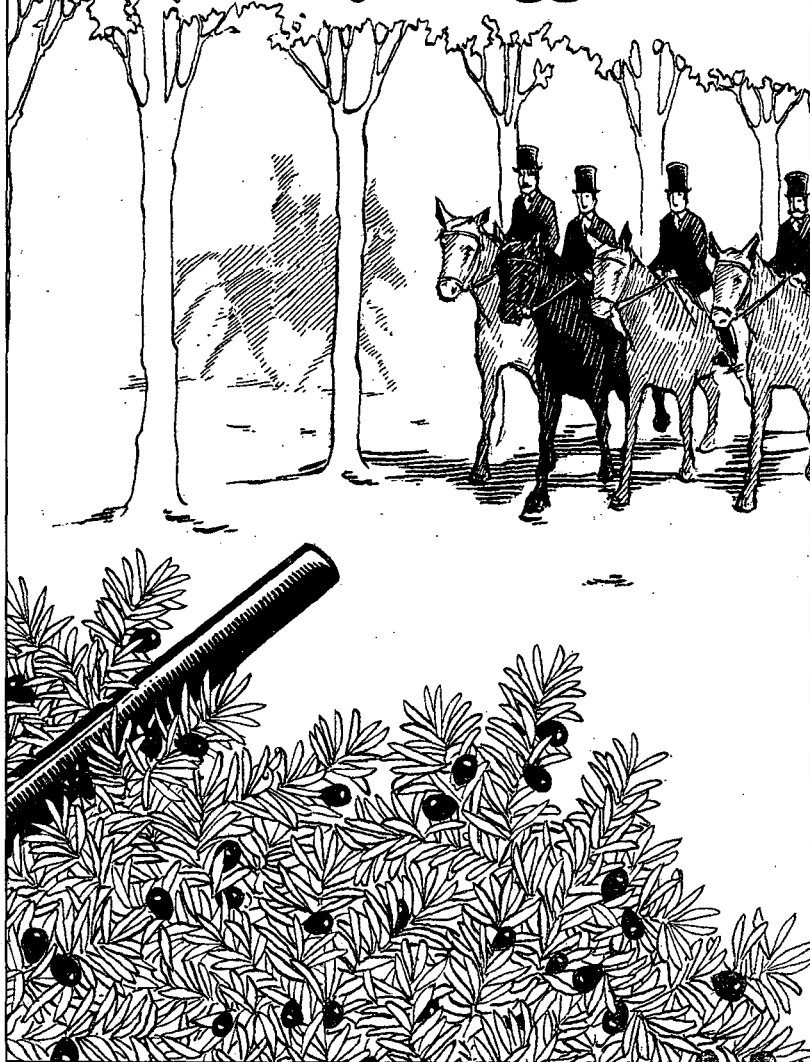
Kirsty Honeywell walked round to my side of the desk, leant over, closed her eyes, and kissed me on the nose. You'd perhaps not think that a kiss on the nose could be anything much, but you'd be wrong. In this specific instance, at least.

She left without another word, and I thought about phoning Cousin Fraser to check up on what she'd told me. But in the end I decided to spend the next couple of hours looking at my ears in a mirror. I have to say, they looked normal enough to me.

Anyway, some girls go for character.

THE CASE OF THE LONDON SAFARI

Lloyd Biggle, Jr.





The gunshot sounded like a dull, muffled boom.

We were driving in the Hyde Park carriageway and approaching London's Hyde Park Corner near the carriageway's intersection with Rotten Row, the famous horse-riding track. It was a sprightly morning in the autumn of 1905, and the carriageway was heavily trafficked with ornate vehicles and prized, high-stepping horses. As yet the park was showing no intimations of approaching winter. It was still lushly green.

Lady Sara Varnley was driving, and the carriage and horses were the property of Sir Thomas Tallmage, one of London's most distinguished physicians. The carriage, which he used in his practice, was less elaborately festooned with gilt than others in the carriageway; the horses, however, were a new pair he had just purchased and was extremely proud of. He had invited Lady Sara to try them out.

I, Colin Quick, was Lady Sara's assistant, or secretary, or chief investigator, or whatever she needed at the moment. That morning, along with a uniformed servant of Sir Thomas's, I was serving as footman. There are far more comfortable places to travel than the footman's position at the rear of a carriage. As we approached the end of the carriageway, I was feeling cramped and uncomfortable. I had made the mistake of saying so, and my fellow footman was regarding me with contempt.

Lady Sara and Sir Thomas were enjoying themselves, however, chatting gaily while Lady Sara drove.

Obviously she was impressed with Sir Thomas's new horses and found driving them a genuine pleasure.

Suddenly that very strange gunshot rang out somewhere in the row of trees and shrubs that separated the carriageway from Rotten Row. I had never heard one like it and I was slow to react, but Lady Sara immediately pulled the horses to a halt at the side of the carriageway, called for Sir Thomas's footman to take charge, and made a most unladylike dash, lifting her skirts a few inches for convenience but not far enough for decorum to suffer. Sir Thomas followed her, and I hurried after them. One at a time we burst through the shrubbery into Rotten Row.

In the carriageway, carriages and horses were on display; in Rotten Row, people were on display. The elegantly dressed male riders wore dark frockcoats with collar, tie, and silk hat. Their trousers looked uncomfortably tight, which was the style of the day. The ladies, who of course rode side-saddle, wore special riding costumes, most of them black or dark grey. The bodices had little coattails and buttoned as high as the throat. Stylish white collars and cuffs, a long, full skirt, varnished boots, and a silk hat like a man's completed the costume. Only the more daring chose other colours, with sometimes a splash of red from a concealed waistcoat.

A cluster of such riders, several of them already dismounted, were assisting a man who seemed to have fallen from his horse. Even as we approached, more riders were arriving as well as people who had

been enjoying the park on foot. They gathered nearby, wondering what had happened. The fallen man lay on the track with one foot still caught in a stirrup. His silk hat had been crushed when a horse stepped on it.

None of the spectators had as yet grasped the horror of what had happened—nor had I until I glimpsed the fallen man's face. It was handsome, with a carelessly drooping lock of curly hair across his forehead. I recognized him at once. He was Charles Dallman, Earl of Shernham, and he looked as dead as he turned out to be. By a remarkable coincidence Lady Sara Varnley, the finest detective in England, had chanced onto the scene of a sensational crime immediately after it occurred.

Sir Thomas took one look and called an order to me. Lady Sara called another. I wheeled and sprinted back to the carriage. I snatched Sir Thomas's medical bag—no doubt years of practice had taught him never to be without it, even on a pleasant drive with the woman he had been trying for years to persuade to marry him. I delivered Lady Sara's order to Sir Thomas's footman, who immediately drove off while I sprinted back to Rotten Row. I might as well have made a leisurely walk of it both ways. The fallen rider was indeed dead and had been so before any help could reach him.

Lady Sara was forming the idle riders and pedestrians into a cordon to keep others from approaching the scene. I delivered the bag to Sir Thomas and left the dead man

to his examination while I joined Lady Sara.

Once she had the cordon arranged to her satisfaction, she moved with care into and out of the shrubbery along the riding track. I followed her, looking about carefully but seeing nothing significant. Finally, some seventy feet farther along Rotten Row from the place where the Earl had fallen from his horse, Lady Sara showed me where the murderer had probably concealed himself.

"Here is the impression of his knee where he knelt to shoot," she said. "The indentation beside it is where he rested the butt of the rifle while he waited for the Earl to approach."

After giving me terse instructions for pacing off distances, she went to rejoin Sir Thomas. When I had carefully recorded the information she wanted in my notebook, I found her in conversation with three riders who had been accompanying the dead man. She wanted to know their exact positions at the time of the shot. She made them remount, retreat some distance, and then ride toward her in the same formation they had been riding in before—minus the dead man, of course. It took several repetitions of this to satisfy her. When finally she turned away, she found the massive form and bristling mustache of Chief Inspector Mewer hovering behind her.

The Chief Inspector, who was breathing heavily from his own dash to the park, knew only that someone—it had been the footman—had insisted on speaking with



him on the telephone and, when the Chief Inspector responded, had delivered a panting message: "Lady Sara says get to the Hyde Park Corner end of Rotten Row at once. There's been murder done."

Having learned from experience not to ignore Lady Sara's commands, he had come posthaste, collecting a small entourage of police officers along the way. His own first thought was to find out what Lady Sara had been up to, so he was leaving the preliminary investigation to his assistants. He asked, looking in the direction of the dead body, "Who is it?"

"The Earl of Shernham," Lady Sara said.

The Chief Inspector winced. It would be the kind of investigation he hated, one where London's newspapers would be scrutinizing and criticizing and reporting his every move.

Charles Dallman, Earl of Shernham, had been one of England's most popular noblemen. He was wealthy, generous, handsome, superbly competent at anything he undertook. He was everyone's favourite houseguest, and as a host, his invitations were almost as sought after as those of the King. He was England's most eligible bachelor. He was also reputed to be a man of the highest integrity. Dr. Samuel Johnson had once said of the Third Duke of Devonshire that if he had promised you an acorn, and none grew in his woods that year, he would send to Denmark for it. Something similar could be said about the Earl of Shernham. No scandal had ever touched him.

It was difficult to comprehend why anyone would want to murder him.

We went to look at the body. The bullet had entered the Earl's chest and passed completely through him at an angle. Even with clothing obscuring the wound, it was obvious that the bullet had been of an unusually large calibre.

"The shot sounded like that of an outsized elephant gun," Lady Sara said. "That means it probably fired an Eley 600 nitro cartridge. A 60 calibre bullet is a huge projectile. When you undress the body, you should find an exceptionally large bullet hole in the chest and a hideously large exit wound in the back. When you solve the case, you will have on your hands the most courteous and considerate murderer in Scotland Yard's annals."

"Why do you say that?" the Chief Inspector demanded.

Lady Sara showed him the place in the shrubbery where she had found evidence of a kneeling sharpshooter, and she arranged the three riders in the same position they had been in when Lord Shernham was shot.

"An elephant gun easily could have killed someone riding behind him. The murderer avoided that by waiting until other riders were clear of his line of sight. Further, he placed himself so that the angle of the shot would take the bullet into the trees rather than along Rotten Row where the next party of riders would be endangered. I thought I heard it hit a tree. If it didn't, its momentum should have carried it into another grove of trees east of the Serpentine, where the chances



of inadvertently hitting anyone would be remote.”

The Chief Inspector studied my notebook gravely and then put one of his constables to copying my notes. I wanted to tell him to do his own measurements, but Lady Sara was clearly in a rare mood of cooperation. Even so, after she dictated a short statement, I politely declined to contribute one myself. “All I was doing was running errands,” I said. Chief Inspector Mewer scowled at me, but he made no comment.

Leaving the murder scene to the police, we returned to Sir Thomas’s carriage, which his footman had brought back to the approximate point where we had left it. The footman and I took our places; Sir Thomas and Lady Sara resumed their drive. They had only a short distance to go before they were back in Park Lane and headed for Lady Sara’s house and headquarters in Connaught Mews.

When Sir Thomas had taken his leave of us and returned to Harley Street and his routine of medical appointments, Lady Sara ordered her own carriage made ready. We drove to the Park Lane home of Lord Clive Anstee, Marquis of Donover and an old friend of Lady Sara’s father. The Marquis had been virtually a second father to her, and they were immensely fond of each other. He came at a run when he heard her voice and enveloped her in a tremendous embrace.

He was a distinguished-looking old man with white hair, mutton-chop whiskers, and a portly figure

that was ample testimony to a life dedicated to what he himself considered the highest of the arts—fine eating and fine drinking. He was one of the few noblemen I knew who could instinctively bridge the gap between peer and commoner and put the commoner completely at ease.

After the Marquis had got us seated, he asked Lady Sara, “What oddity are you pursuing now?”

She told him of our adventure in the park, and he listened with mouth agape.

“Charlie Dallman murdered in Hyde Park with an elephant gun!” he mused. “That certainly is an unexpected turn. If it had occurred around a card table, with a revolver, immediately after he had triumphantly drawn three cards to a royal flush, I would have said it had to happen sooner or later. But an elephant gun in Hyde Park—”

“That was what I wanted to ask you about,” Lady Sara said. “Did any of his poker victims take their losses seriously?”

Lord Anstee folded his hands and meditated. “There aren’t many of them in London,” he said finally. “I’ve heard he played regularly with friends in East Anglia, where his estate is, but I know nothing about that. In London, at least, those who lost a bit the first time they played would be unlikely to play again. The veteran players learned to hold their own against him. Would you like a list?”

“I would,” Lady Sara said.

The Marquis rang for pencil and paper and wrote down five names for her.



"Charlie learned poker during a stay in America," he said. "He became a poker fanatic. He was addicted to poker the way your father was addicted to cribbage, Sara. Draw poker was the variety he preferred. It isn't a popular game in England as you know. People here would rather play whist or that new-fangled bridge. They don't know poker and don't want to know it. I feel the same way myself. Charlie often had trouble finding enough players to make a game interesting. He wasn't above inveigling a few women into playing if there weren't enough men available."

"I know," Lady Sara said. "I have played poker with Charlie several times."

"Indeed?" The Marquis looked interested. "Did he demonstrate any further interest in you?"

"Don't be silly," Lady Sara said. "I'm ten years older than he was, and he never demonstrated further interest in any woman. I read him as an inveterate bachelor who would, about age sixty-five, suddenly become aware that a creature as rare as himself had an obligation to the universe to leave a few replicas behind when he died. Whereupon he would marry a girl one third his age and produce a large family. The only thing about me that interested him was that I once managed to bluff him out of a substantial pot at poker."

"That would have interested him," the Marquis agreed. "Your detective ability impressed him more, though. He talked for years about the way you solved a mystery for him."

"That was the case of the disappearing milk," Lady Sara said. "One of his farmhands was running a pig farm on the sly and stealing milk to feed his pigs with. There was nothing clever about his method—he simply put a few extra cans for himself in the wagon every time he transported milk—but the Earl was staggered when I showed him what was happening."

"He told all his friends about it, over and over," the Marquis said. "He always referred to you as a wizard who could solve anything. But poker was his main interest. He considered draw poker very similar to the game of life. The bold man who knows what he wants and can keep his nerve and bluff the most skilled opponent will always win through in the end."

"Poker is nothing like the game of life," Lady Sara said. "We have to play the game of life with the hand that's dealt to us. Unfortunately we cannot, as with draw poker, toss out what we don't like and ask for new cards, or discard the entire hand and draw another. The cards we get are the cards we must use. I am fascinated by the magnificent games some people are able to play with mediocre or even poor cards, and the pathetic games other people play when luck favours them with what should be winning hands. Charlie Dallman's tragedy was in having no conception of what it takes to play with a handicap."

"Yes," the Marquis agreed. "He was never at the slightest disadvantage in anything."

"And his past?" Lady Sara asked.



"Are there any long shadows there that might suddenly have taken on substance?"

The Marquis meditated again. "I suppose you are asking whether he ever perpetrated an injustice that might have made him enemies. I don't know of any. If it were a question of his father, now—the old Earl went through life trailing a procession of outraged fathers, brothers, husbands, and fiancés. No one would've been the least surprised if *he'd* been shot in Hyde Park, whether by elephant gun, crossbow, or cannon. But if Charlie ever wronged a woman, I never heard of it.

"Charlie didn't make enemies, he made devotees—except among his poker partners, and as I said, they either learned to hold their own or stopped playing with him. I've never heard the faintest rumour that suggested anyone would want to kill him. You're looking as perplexed as I feel, Colin. What puzzles you about this crime?"

"I'm wondering what sort of murderer would stalk his prey in Hyde Park and kill him with an elephant gun, my lord," I said. "It's an unlikely place and an unlikely weapon."

"An experienced big game hunter, of course," Lady Sara said impatiently. "It wouldn't even occur to most murderers to choose such a weapon. Were there any big game hunters among the Earl's friends?"

"That I can't answer," the Marquis said, "but there certainly wouldn't have been many. Charlie considered any form of hunting a sacrilege. That was another thing

he was a fanatic about. There was no hunting on his estate. He crusaded against it. He was very untypical for one of his class. If his murderer were an enemy or rival who also was a big game hunter, he might have given himself away the moment he pulled the trigger. But why all this probing of Charlie's background, Sara? This is one crime the police should be able to solve quickly. With Rotten Row crowded with riders and the carriageway full of carriages, surely a number of people noticed a man carrying an elephant gun. By now the police should know all about him."

"It would seem so," Lady Sara said, "but quick solutions seem to elude our police. They always find some way to muddle things."

We took our leave and drove to the Earl of Shernham's splendid old home in Piccadilly. He had inherited it from his father, of course, and kept it fully staffed, but he used it only during the social season and on his infrequent visits to London.

We found the servants overwhelmed with astonishment and grief. They knew Lady Sara well and they did their best to answer her questions, but because the Earl rarely entertained at home, they knew little about his London associates. None of them had the slightest notion of who could have done such a horrible thing. The Earl had no enemies, they said. Everyone loved him.

"Did he ride in the park every day?" Lady Sara asked.

"Like clockwork whenever he was in London," the butler said.



"He left home at exactly ten o'clock every morning except Sunday, rain or shine."

We thanked him.

"There is a moral here," Lady Sara announced as we drove away. "If you have an enemy, don't do anything like clockwork. And despite what the servants say, the Earl certainly had at least one."

"Did you expect the servants to know anything?" I asked.

She shook her head. "If that enemy is a long shadow out of the Earl's past, servants who saw him only in London—or an elderly friend like the Marquis, who never visited him in the country—would be unlikely to have any awareness of it. The background of this crime is going to take in more territory than Chief Inspector Mewer will like."

"Do you want me to go back to Hyde Park and try to trace the murderer's escape route?" I asked.

"The police will be working on that now. They would be in your way and you in theirs. We will take a different approach entirely. We will start in Fleet Street." I stared at her. "It's an approach the police won't have thought of," she added.

It was an approach no one would have thought of but Lady Sara. I asked, "What possible connection could Fleet Street have with the Earl of Shernham?"

"The Earl was principal financial backer of a newspaper, the London *Weekly Mirror*, which purports to be a comic and satirical review of current events. It also devotes a deal of space to gossip. The Earl was a prude at heart, and he de-

lighted in exposing the peccadillos of his fellow peers and their families. His newspaper infuriates a lot of people. The question is—did any of them know of his connection with it?"

"How can we find out?"

"For a start, we can look at some back issues and see whom he has been infuriating."

We first returned to Connaught Mews, where Lady Sara gave Lord Anstee's list of the Earl's poker companions to her two footmen, Rick Allward and Charles Tupper. Both were experienced investigators. Lady Sara told them to find out where the men on the Marquis's list had been at the time the Earl was murdered.

That taken care of, we drove to Fleet Street.

Printers and publishers began to locate in Fleet Street as early as the sixteenth century, but by 1905 it was no longer the centre of the universe that Dr. Samuel Johnson and his Boswell had thought it. On a bright weekday afternoon, however, it presented a brave show indeed.

It was crowded with horse-drawn buses, their colours advertising their destinations—blue for Waterloo Bridge, white for Liverpool Street, green for Whitechapel. An occasional outsized motor-bus easily overtook the straining horses. Crowds of men and women filled the pavements: typewriter girls, office boys, editors, reporters, writers, artists elbowed past each other on errands for the publications they represented. Looking down on



the scene were tall, narrow houses that carried the names of newspapers and magazines in brilliant colours. Beyond them, atop Ludgate Hill, loomed the grey dome of St. Paul's.

In Fleet Street, like everywhere else in London, the footprints of history were constantly being trampled by the march of progress, but that march seemed to have bypassed the Earl of Shernham's little newspaper. Its entrance was around the corner from around the corner. The brave brass plate that announced its presence in the building had not been polished since it was first affixed. The flights of stairs came in pairs, and when we had passed the third story, my faith in the *London Weekly Mirror's* ability to arouse anyone's animosity faded. A paper with such an inaccessible office could not have many readers.

The editor had just received news of the Earl's death, and he was staggered. An obese, bald man who might have looked jolly under normal circumstances, he now wore a worried expression appropriate to one who had just lost his principal financial backer. When Lady Sara had explained her errand, he shook his head. He was certain the paper had never published anything that could have infuriated anyone to the point of murder. If we wanted to look for ourselves, however . . .

He placed us at a table in a small, stuffy room with several years of files of the *London Weekly Mirror* in front of us. We divided them up and went to work on them, and after I

had ploughed my way through half a dozen issues, I sat back and looked doubtfully at Lady Sara.

"Even if the material were inflammatory enough to cause murder—and what I have seen isn't—that wouldn't matter because the only people who know about it are the writer, the editor, and the typesetter. Surely this trash doesn't have any readers."

"Have you seen any references to someone called Long Shanks?"

"A few rather laboured jokes."

She showed me a cartoon. An extremely long-legged hunter was taking aim with a very large gun at a mosquito that was perched on the front gun sight. The caption read, "The big game seems smaller this year."

"Obviously big game hunting was a favourite target of the Earl, and he certainly was fond of poking fun at a tall big game hunter," Lady Sara said. "It isn't clear—yet—whether the term 'Long Shanks' was directed at one individual or was a personification of all big game hunters."

"At first I thought Long Shanks was a horse," I said. "There were several references to blazing speed. Then I saw an item that called Long Shanks a genuine sportsman because he pursues his prey with a gun, thus allowing it a fifty-fifty chance to escape, when he could easily overtake it on foot."

We read further, looking for more references, and then we consulted the editor.

"I think it was His Lordship's private joke, my lady," he said. "Those things often were all but in-



comprehensible, and frequently the humour was obscure and heavy-handed, but His Lordship was meeting the deficit and they took up very little space and since he wanted them included—"He shrugged.

"Did he write them himself?" Lady Sara asked.

"He supplied copy in his own handwriting. The occasional cartoons on those subjects—Long Shanks and big game hunting—were obtained by him from a very competent artist he never identified. I always suspected that a well-known cartoonist from *Punch* or one of the larger newspapers was being lavishly paid to draw those illustrations anonymously."

"What happens with the paper now that you have lost your financial support?" Lady Sara asked.

"We will bravely soldier on for a few issues, frantically making changes that we hope will enlarge our readership. And then—"

He lifted both hands forlornly. The paper's ultimate fate was obvious. It would ignominiously cease to exist.

Lady Sara asked for the loan of some back issues, and he gave her everything she wanted. Perhaps he wistfully regarded her as a potential financial backer to replace the dead Earl.

"Where now?" I asked Lady Sara.

"Home," she said. "Tomorrow we will try the gunsmiths."

"Chief Inspector Mewer will have exhausted that vein," I said.

"Perhaps we can find a few turnings he has overlooked."

The Chief Inspector arrived at Connaught Mews shortly after we

did. The expression on his face suggested that the case was muddled already. He asked Lady Sara almost politely, "When you heard the gunshot, how did you know instantly that murder had been done?"

"I didn't," she told him. "I only knew that something highly irregular had occurred."

"You stopped your carriage at once and ran through the trees and shrubbery to Rotten Row. Surely you wouldn't have done that on a whim."

"I don't know of any legitimate reason for discharging an elephant gun in Hyde Park, so I went to investigate," Lady Sara said. "The best physician in London took charge of the body immediately, and I sent for you and then cordoned off the murder scene and found the place the shot had been fired from. Do you have any complaints?"

"Certainly not. It just seemed odd that you would act so decisively on so little evidence."

"Who inherits?"

"The Earl's younger brother, who is vicar of an obscure parish in Dorset. Local police assure me he was carrying out his churchly duties all day and could not have been anywhere near London. He was his brother's greatest admirer, and as far as anyone knows, he was completely contented with his religious calling. Now he'll have to take over his brother's position and wealth, and he doesn't want either."

"He is a rare man," Lady Sara observed.

"Rare is the word for it. I en-



countered one once before. This one makes two."

"Did you think to ask the East Anglia police about the Earl's friends and associates there?"

"I did. They don't know of any enemies. As for his friends, the police quickly established that all of them were going about their usual business at the time of the murder except for one who has been sick in bed for several days."

"Did anyone in the park catch a glimpse of the murderer?"

"Several people saw a man wheeling a handcart loaded with tree branches along the carriageway both before and after the murder. He was shabbily dressed; they took him for an undergardener. The only oddity was that they all thought there was something misshapen about him. He was noticeably tall with unusually long legs and a slight body and had a long beard. There also was something odd about his face, but no two people have seen that the same way."

"Indeed!" Lady Sara exclaimed. She gave him the copies of the *London Weekly Mirror* and told him about the Earl's rancour toward someone he called Long Shanks and his contempt for hunting—especially big game hunting.

"Your anonymous undergardener certainly sounds like a 'Long Shanks,'" she said. "With that description you should be able to identify him quickly. Surely the other gardeners will know him."

"No Hyde Park employee fits the description. On the other hand, this character has been seen in the park before."

Lady Sara nodded. "It was obvious from the beginning that the murder was carefully planned. The murderer probably went over the ground several times. His beard was a disguise, as was his face, and no one saw the elephant gun because it was concealed in the handcart. Of course no one paid the slightest attention to him. A gardener in Hyde Park would be part of the scenery to most people."

"Fortunately for us, he couldn't disguise his long shanks," the Chief Inspector said with grim satisfaction. "We reconstruct his movements like this: He impersonated a genuine gardener by loading the handcart with tree branchings taken from a pile of tree trimmings, and during the murder he left it at the edge of the trees somewhere past the Albert Gate. Immediately after the murder he made his escape by keeping to the trees and shrubbery along the carriageway so no one would see him. Since no one did see him, he must have done it skillfully."

"If he's an experienced big game hunter, he also is experienced at stalking and keeping out of sight," Lady Sara said.

"He returned to his handcart, placed the rifle in it under the branches, and wheeled it away. He left the park by the Alexandra Gate with the handcart still loaded with tree limbs. He was last seen headed out Exhibition Road. We're continuing to look for witnesses, of course."

"What have you learned about the gun?" Lady Sara asked.

"As far as we've been able to de-



termine, you were right about it. It probably was the largest calibre available. The gun expert we called in, an employee of Purdey's who has seen many wounds in big game animals, thought the bullet came from an Eley 600 nitro cartridge as you suggested. Also as you suggested, the exit wound was enormous."

"It would take a strong man to make accurate use of a gun like that. Since those guns are built to order, you should be able to trace it."

"I hope so," Chief Inspector Mewer said. "We've already started calling on the London gunsmiths, and we have asked police in other communities to question gunsmiths outside of London. We also are continuing to question everyone we can find who was in Hyde Park at that time."

Lady Sara wished the Chief Inspector luck.

That night I copied into my notebook a list of London gun and rifle makers. Three of them—Purdey, in South Audley Street; Winchester Repeating Arms Company, in Laurence Pountney Hill; and Colt's Fire Arms Company, in Pall Mall—were well known. Some of the others I had never heard of, but then, I had never had occasion to shop for any kind of rifle or firearm.

Lady Sara's footmen, Rick Allward and Charles Tupper, reported back before I went to bed. They had established alibis for all the Earl's poker playing friends, and they reported that none of them were big game hunters.

In the morning we started out. As I expected, the police had already

questioned the firms exhaustively about elephant guns and large calibre weapons in general and had also enquired about an exceptionally tall and slender big game hunter, but Lady Sara quickly found a turning the Chief Inspector had overlooked. She asked about former employees. She was especially interested in whether any of them had gone into business for himself after leaving the firm's employ. By the time we had called at the last name on my original list, I had acquired another list with the names and addresses of some forty former employees of gunsmiths.

Big game rifles were largely custom made to the customer's specifications, and they represented a considerable investment. Lady Sara reasoned that a master gunsmith whose work was well known to his employer's customers could easily take over some of them if he set up in business for himself. He could live very comfortably making repairs and building one or two new guns a year.

The remainder of that day as well as the next two days was spent in accumulating more negatives. Those former employees of gunsmiths who continued to build guns in retirement or who had established their own businesses had no exceptionally tall customers, and none of them had crafted an elephant gun shooting 600 nitro cartridges for anyone. All we had discovered was another dead end.

When we had exhausted our list of former employees who actually were gunsmiths, we began to interview lesser employees who were



unable to make guns but who might remember something about their former employer's customers. One of these was a John Sherwood who had been a caretaker for the gunsmith Westley Richards. He had a surprising address. We took a hansom cab to his comfortable walled villa in St. John's Wood.

Retirement suited him. There was a plump and comfortable look about him and his wife as well. They were simple, friendly people who delighted in recounting the good fortune that had overtaken them. An aunt of his wife's had died. Her estate should have gone to her daughter, but the daughter had predeceased her by only a month, leaving Sherwood's wife as her only surviving close relative.

"Lucy inherited this house and enough money for us to live comfortably," Sherwood said. "Since we have no children to leave it to, it will go to strangers if we don't spend it ourselves. So we both retired—she had been Lady Vistley's cook for twenty years—and moved here. And we've never regretted it."

The former caretaker and cook were leading a relaxed existence with their own staff of servants.

As a witness John Sherwood was disappointing, however, because he remembered so much. He seemed to recall vividly every exceptional customer of Westley Richards who had visited the firm during his long tenure, and there was no unusually tall big game hunter among them.

As we were taking our leave, he suddenly asked whether we were also interviewing jobbers.

"What are jobbers?" Lady Sara wanted to know.

"They perform bits of work that are highly specialized or require special knowledge. Also, some of those chaps invent things—a new safety mechanism, a new kind of firing pin, a new gun sight—and the firm would send a gun to them to have this invention installed if the customer wanted it. The reason I asked—those jobbers could build a complete gun for a customer with all kinds of modifications over a standard gun. You might not find them listed as gunsmiths because they have their own longtime customers and all the work they want."

He gave us names and addresses of four jobbers to whom he had sometimes delivered guns to be worked on or called for guns when finished. We thanked him for his time and turned our attention to this new list.

The first call took us to the home of Everett Vaisey in a nondescript terrace off Fullham Road. The front garden was overgrown; it was a street of overgrown front gardens and looked shabby, but Lady Sara was determined to be optimistic. She dismissed our cab in anticipation of a long interview.

"We can easily find another in Fullham Road," she said.

A middle-aged woman responded to the bell-pull. She shook her head sadly when we asked for Everett Vaisey.

"Father died eight months ago," she said.

She had no objection to talking to us about him. Not only had he invented a special kind of gun sight,

but he had built big game guns in any calibre the customer wanted, with a number of improvements of his own.

But that was as much as she could tell us. Her brother had taken her father's tools and records and was carrying on the business, at least as far as the gun sight was concerned.

Resignedly we took the brother's address, which was halfway across London in Camden Town. There was nothing more we could do but thank her and head for Fullham Road to whistle up a cab.

Approaching us far up the street was a donkey cart loaded with shabby furniture. The contents of the cart told their own story—someone was moving to new quarters in the aftermath of an eviction. The filthy, unshaven, shabbily dressed driver seemed to be half dozing, chin resting on his chest. His long, drooping mustache had a defeated look.

As we reached the entranceway to the next house, a four wheeler drove up, and we promptly forgot the cart. The driver helped a pretty young woman in a pink dress to dismount. She paid him and turned toward the house. With a cab thus presented to us, we abandoned our walk and engaged it at once. The furniture cart passed us as we were climbing aboard. While the former passenger was walking toward her front door, we drove off in a clatter of the horse's hooves.

Suddenly a shot rang out—the same dull, unusually loud *boom* that now was haunting my dreams except that without the Hyde Park

trees to deaden the sound, it reverberated among the houses and went echoing down the narrow street. A woman screamed. Lady Sara shouted at the driver, "Stop!"

Before he could bring the horse to a standstill, I was out of the cab on one side, the street side, and Lady Sara was out of it on the other.

I stood there for a moment feeling totally bewildered. The donkey cart of furniture was now moving at a trot far down the street. As I watched it, it turned a corner. Otherwise the street was peacefully deserted. I walked around the cab to where Lady Sara and a retired Indian Army officer who lived next door were ministering to the gunshot victim, the attractive young woman who was the cab's former passenger. She told us she was Mrs. Celeste Dowerly, and she seemed more surprised than hurt by the experience of being shot. She had been grazed by a large-calibre bullet, and for several days she was going to have an extremely sore arm from a bad burn.

The retired army officer was willing to help in any way he could, so Lady Sara asked him to take the waiting cab, notify the local police division, and have the duty officer send an urgent message to Scotland Yard telling Chief Inspector Mewer that this new crime was related to the park murder. He also was to bring back a doctor for Mrs. Dowerly, who insisted she didn't need one.

Before the officer left, I questioned the cab driver. Since everything had happened behind his back, he had seen nothing. He



drove off with the officer aboard, and I prowled about trying to find where the shot could have come from.

A few neighbour women became aware that something unusual was happening, and they hurried out to help or hinder. I questioned all of them; they had seen nothing, and only two of them had noticed the shot. Obviously it had not come from one of the houses, and those barren front gardens offered little cover for a gunman wielding such a large weapon. Further, since the houses were joined together in a terrace, there was no escape route.

The army officer returned with a doctor, who joined Mrs. Dowerly and Lady Sara in the Dowerly residence. A police constable and a sergeant arrived on his heels, and the two of them went in to interview the victim. I paid the cab driver—over the officer's objections—and after the cab left, the officer joined me in my speculations. He had seen the donkey cart approaching but had started back into his house before he heard the shot.

"I did have a good look at the cart driver just before I turned away," he said. "He was holding something on his lap. It looked like a folded coat."

"Could there have been an elephant gun folded in the coat?" I asked.

"It's certainly possible, though I didn't see it. There were odds and ends of furniture sticking up around him. If he did fire the shot, he must have rested the rifle butt against the furniture or against the side of the cart. Otherwise the recoil

might have sent it flying. Or maybe he turned sideways, holding the gun under his arm when he pulled the trigger. Even so, he would have to be an amazing shot to be able to fire with the gun in that position, just casually pointing it in Mrs. Dowerly's direction, and come so close to wounding or killing her. But why Mrs. Dowerly? Surely an innocent young woman like her has no enemies."

"I should have used the cab to follow the cart," I said ruefully.

"Immediately after the shot was fired, I wouldn't have needed the cab," the officer said. "I could have caught the cart easily and pulled the driver off. But my first concern was for Mrs. Dowerly."

I found Lady Sara still talking with the sergeant. When she finished, I asked her whether I should try to catch the cart on foot.

"No," she said. "The police will search the area. They might even find it, but my instinct says the driver and his gun are already transferred to a very different vehicle and no longer can be overtaken."

An extremely puzzled Chief Inspector Mewer found Lady Sara and me waiting for him in Mrs. Dowerly's sitting room. He demanded to know Fullham Road's connection with the park murder. When the situation was explained to him, he helped himself to a chair beside Lady Sara and asked, "What does Mrs. Dowerly have to do with the Earl of Shernham?"

"I want to show you something," Lady Sara said. She and Mrs. Dowerly stood with their backs to us.



"What do you observe?" she asked over her shoulder.

"She's in a light pink dress, and I would describe yours as light tan," the Chief Inspector said.

"Apart from that, are there any similarities?"

"Well, yes. Both of you have your hair arranged the same way, and you're about the same height and shape, and except for their colour the two dresses look about the same."

"Exactly. A person with a certain type of colour-blindness could easily mistake Mrs. Dowerly's light pink gown for my light tan gown. Actually, hers is a slightly different pattern, but a man who has paid little attention to women's apparel wouldn't be likely to notice. The bullet that grazed her arm was intended for me."

The Chief Inspector moved his jaw several times, but he seemed unable to form words.

"This is what I think happened," Lady Sara went on. "The character driving that cart may have been stalking me through London for two or three days. He must have used a number of vehicles and a number of disguises, or Colin and I would have noticed. Much of the time it would be difficult to obtain a clear shot at someone in a London street under circumstances that would let the gunman take aim, fire, and escape unnoticed—especially if the gun is an elephant gun. In addition to crowds of people on the pavements, there are always carriages, or drays, or vans, or omnibuses, or costermongers, or bicyclists. In my case, Colin is usually

walking beside me, and that must have complicated things for him. This hunter is a very patient person—but then, big game hunters have to learn patience. They also are skilled at stalking their prey. And by the way, I've heard that colour-blindness is actually an advantage for them. Animals have been endowed with colours and colour patterns that naturally conceal them, but a colour-blind hunter may see the animal clearly because he can't see the concealing patterns.

"So our hunter was following his prey—me. He saw us go into the Vaisey residence. He waited at the end of the street, and when we came out and started walking in his direction, he must have thought his long vigil was about to be rewarded. The street was virtually deserted. He started toward us, but just before he got close enough to shoot, the cab drove up. He could no longer see Colin and me because the cab was in the way. He also couldn't see who got out of the cab, and he couldn't see us board it. When the cab started away, there was Mrs. Dowerly—who, to a colour-blind man, looked exactly like me—walking up to the house. It was almost too late for a shot, he was already past her, but he took it anyway."

The Chief Inspector looked at Lady Sara sternly. "What have you found out that makes him want to kill you?"

"That's the most puzzling thing about this. Nothing. We are still searching for the vital clue—as I assume you are."



"Accept my congratulations on still being alive," the Chief Inspector said. "Big game hunters train themselves to get off shots quickly and accurately. Your life was saved by the chance arrival of the cab.

"Mrs. Dowerly was saved by the fact that this particular big game hunter was a tad overconfident—taking a late shot sitting down, whether the gun was across his lap or under his arm. It might have saved your life a second time.

"When he learns of his failure, he will certainly try again, but you are now forewarned. All of us are forewarned. You will now have police surveillance wherever you go."

"Nonsense!" Lady Sara exclaimed.

Chief Inspector Mewer regarded her gravely. "I can't think of anything more unpleasant than to be stalked through the streets of London by an experienced big game hunter who is a deadly shot with an elephant gun. I want you to remain in concealment. We have a good chance of identifying him and catching him now. He made two mistakes today. He fired and missed, and he allowed himself to be seen by a number of people. Colonel Ennion, the officer next door, has given us an excellent description of him, which is something we couldn't obtain after the murder."

"It can't be much of a description," Lady Sara said. "Shabby clothing, as before, and long mustaches instead of a beard. His height wasn't evident this time since he was driving the cart."

"Anyway, you're to remain in concealment."

"I'll consider it," Lady Sara said, "but not right now. Surely I'll be safe until tomorrow. He doesn't know yet that he shot the wrong person and missed. As long as he thinks I'm dead, he won't try to follow me."

To celebrate that supposed freedom from danger, we took a cab all the way to Camden Town to see the Vaisey son who had inherited his father's business. The result was disappointing. He had notified all of his father's customers that he had taken over the gun sight business. Then he destroyed his father's records. Most of them were worthless to him because he wasn't able to do the full range of work his father had done.

We returned to Connaught Mews and sat facing each other across the large conference table in Lady Sara's office. Between us lay the world's largest cribbage board, an invention of Lady Sara's father, the cribbage fanatic. Lady Sara used it to keep track of the cases she was working on. Only one of the board's tracks was in use, the one indicating the Earl's murder, and the pegs were still in the starting holes.

Lady Sara said meditatively, "According to Chief Inspector Mewer, at the time of the Earl's murder all his friends in East Anglia were going about their affairs as usual except one who was sick in bed. Which one, how sick was he, and where was he today when the shot was fired?"

The next morning I caught an early train at Liverpool Station,



changed in Cambridge, and arrived at Bury St. Edmunds well before noon. I hired a trap there and drove south through a pleasant countryside, meditating the case along the way.

Among other things I had to find out whether a man who was thought sick in bed could slip away unseen, travel to London, commit a murder, and return to East Anglia and his bed without being missed. As far as train connections were concerned, it was possible. Whether he could do it unnoticed would have to be determined.

I could have armed myself with a letter from Chief Inspector Mewer and acquired instantaneous cooperation from the local police, but I didn't want it. Neither did I intend to call at the Earl of Shernham's country manor and interview his servants. If he had any local enemies, the county constabulary—the chief constable probably had dined with him regularly—would know all about it and would have informed London.

The town of Birnley Green was a surprise. The nearby estate of the Earl, one of the wealthier peers of England, made it more prosperous and populous than the other towns and villages of the region. It possessed a number of brick-built homes of surprising size for a small town, each set in its own large garden. The cottages, framed and plastered in the best Tudor style, had pleasing gables and dormers on the upper floors and neatly tiled roofs. Everything seemed in excellent repair. The high street offered a full complement of shops and services.

The inn was a second surprise. It was called the Royal Flush. Probably there was not another inn or pub in Britain of that name. I asked a passerby, an elderly, bearded farmer, about it.

"Used to be the Royal Oak," he said. "The Earl—the one murdered in London a few days ago—played cards there with his cronies almost every night when he was at home. Last time the sign was repainted, he persuaded the landlord to change its name."

A boy of ten or so came slouching along. I whistled him over to my trap. "What's your name?" I asked. "James Noakes."

"I need a boy to look after my horse while I'm making calls," I said. "Are you free?"

He was. I sent him home to get his mother's permission; he came galloping back. In this simple way I dispensed with the problem of leaving the horse and trap untended for long periods. I also acquired a source of information. Boys of that age do like to talk.

Leaving James in charge, I went in to see the landlord. He was George Burgess, comfortably fat, naturally congenial, the archetypal landlord. He beamed with pride when I mentioned the uniqueness of his inn's name.

Then he showed me a back room with a black wreath on the door. It was where the Earl and his cronies had played poker. They sometimes played half the night away, and if the landlord continued to serve them drinks long after hours, who would question it? The Earl himself was the magistrate.



"Any big game hunters among his cronies?" I asked casually.

"That's Sir Reginald. You know about him, of course."

I had to confess that I didn't.

"He was a hero of the African wars," Burgess said. "He saved the lives of white settlers and acted as scout for the army. If he'd been a military man, he would have received the Victoria Cross. But he wasn't, so Her Majesty knighted him. Sir Reginald Denty—are you sure you haven't heard of him?"

The name was vaguely familiar, but I continued to profess ignorance.

"He's hunted big game around the world," Burgess said. "Africa, India, South America. Caught malaria badly and has periodic attacks even now. He was having one when the Earl was murdered—he'd been in bed for several days—but weak as he was, he dragged himself off to London to see if he could be of any help. He's a very courageous man."

"Where would I find a photograph of him?" I asked.

"I have one myself," Burgess said.

He opened the sacred room for me—the one with the black wreath on the door, the one where the Earl of Shernham had held his poker orgies. The walls were lined with pictures. There was a group photograph of the entire "club," the Earl and the half dozen men who regularly played poker with him. They sat facing the camera across a long table on which cards and money were scattered. Sir Reginald was seated at one end.

He was the ugliest man I had ever seen. And he looked small. I

asked myself whether I had recently seen that clean-shaven face on a cart driver, ornamented with long mustaches. I couldn't say.

I remarked on Sir Reginald's apparent smallness.

Burgess nodded. "Deformed, he is. Born that way, small, unusually short legs, slight body. Made himself a great hunter in spite of that. They say he's a dead shot from any position."

Another photograph showed Sir Reginald with an impressive bag of game—a lion, an elephant, assorted antelope. He looked like the midget he was beside three black native bearers.

I enquired routinely about the other members of the club and heard nothing that interested me.

I consumed an obligatory half pint, treating the landlord for his kindness, and returned to my trap. "Where does Sir Reginald live?" I asked James.

He knew, of course. Everyone in Birnley Green knew where the famous Sir Reginald Denty lived. It was one of the pleasant large brick houses I had noted earlier. I improvised my cover story as I walked up to the door.

Sir Reginald had nothing as formal as a butler; his plump housekeeper answered.

"In connection with the tragic death of the Earl of Shernham, my newspaper is publishing an article on famous friends of the Earl. Would it be possible to interview Sir Reginald?"

"Oh, he never allows interviews," she said.

"Perhaps we could manage with-



out one if we can obtain the necessary information. He is a remarkable man, and the public should be better informed about him."

"Oh, it should," she breathed.

"Is Sir Reginald married?"

"Oh no. He has always been too much of a wanderer for that."

"I understand he was sick in bed at the time the Earl was murdered."

"He was. He has severe attacks of malaria from time to time, and he is completely helpless when it happens. He retires to the little cottage he built at the rear of the house as a study and tries to sleep it off. Sometimes it takes days."

"Doesn't he need to eat occasionally?"

"His black servant, Daudi, looks after him and comes to the house for broth and biscuits when he is hungry. Usually he is too sick to eat more than that."

"Of course you look in on him regularly to make certain he's all right," I murmured.

"I wouldn't dare! When he's sick, he doesn't want to be bothered. Anyway, Daudi is completely devoted to him and gives him excellent care."

"He left for London when he heard the Earl had been murdered, but he'd been isolated for days in his cottage. How did he find out?"

"I told him. It wasn't until the afternoon of the next day when I heard about it. I went to the cottage right away and insisted on seeing Sir Reginald. Daudi finally realized my errand was urgent, so he admitted me and I told Sir Reginald what had happened. He was still

extremely sick, but he got up at once and left for London."

"Then—he isn't at home now?"

"Of course not. He's still in London."

"In that case, I wonder if I could see this cottage he uses for a study."

She was reluctant, but I managed to persuade her. Daudi, a husky black man of medium height, had adopted European clothing but did not seem comfortable in it. He also had to be persuaded, but eventually I saw the room Sir Reginald used for a study—or a sick room when he needed one. It was plainly furnished except for a lavish display of animal heads. The bed was a simple camp bed; the desk, a portable traveler's desk. It probably had journeyed around the world with Sir Reginald.

The cottage was some distance behind the house and all but hidden by trees and shrubbery. Sir Reginald could have come and gone easily without being seen either by his servants or by the neighbours. Near the cottage was the stable where his horse and trap were kept. The devoted Daudi could have driven him to the nearest railway station—in Bury St. Edmunds—without arousing anyone's curiosity, especially at night. Sir Reginald then had to make the trip to London without being noticed, but in a darkened carriage that shouldn't have been difficult. Daudi of course would have covered for him during his absence and met him in Bury St. Edmunds on his return.

I had one more test to make. "I've heard Sir Reginald has a famous



elephant gun. Would it be possible to see it?"

"I don't know if I could let you do that," the housekeeper said. "Anyway, it isn't here."

"It isn't?" I exclaimed, thinking I was about to cinch my case.

"No. A month ago he took it to Price and Watley, the gunsmiths in Cambridge, they do all his work since Mr. Vaisey died. They had to order parts made, which takes time, and they still have the gun."

I had one more question. "Where does Sir Reginald stay in London?"

"He usually stays with friends," she said. "He left in such a hurry that he neglected to mention where he would be staying on this trip."

I thanked her.

There was little more for me to do in Birnley Green, but I undertook one chore on my own initiative, just in case all of my reasoning was wrong. I returned to the Royal Flush and persuaded the landlord to lend me the photograph of Sir Reginald and his trophies.

I paid off James, my faithful helper, and returned to Bury St. Edmunds. I took the next train to Cambridge, and there I went directly to Price and Watley, the gunsmiths, and stated my problem: I was writing a newspaper article about Sir Reginald Denty, and I wanted to see his famous elephant gun.

Mr. Price kindly showed it to me—completely disassembled and waiting for the new parts so repairs could be completed. He explained what it was Sir Reginald wanted replaced. To me, a nonhunter, the long barrel seemed much too un-

wieldy to aim at anything and hit it. The calibre certainly was a large one, and Mr. Price confirmed that the gun took Eley 600 nitro cartridges.

"Most big game rifles have two barrels," he said. "When an elephant or a lion is charging at them, hunters are more confident with a second shot in reserve just in case the first misses. But Sir Reginald feels that one barrel is adequate. His first shots don't miss."

I could have mentioned one that did; or perhaps it wasn't Sir Reginald who fired from the cart at the woman he'd thought was Lady Sara. Certainly there was no possibility that this particular gun had murdered the Earl in Hyde Park, and then, a few days later, wounded Mrs. Dowerly on her doorstep near Fullham Road.

Back in Connaught Mews, I made my report brief. There was only one big game hunter among the Earl's associates. The evidence that he had been sick in bed in Birnley Green with an attack of malaria at the moment the Earl was being murdered probably would stand up in court. The housekeeper and other servants, and especially the black servant, would make convincing witnesses. That evidence looked shaky to me, however, and there was no doubt at all that Sir Reginald had been in London when Mrs. Dowerly was wounded. Neither was there any doubt that on both occasions, his elephant gun had been in the hands of the Cambridge gunsmiths and inoperative.

Lady Sara listened to all of that



without comment. Then I gave her the photograph of the diminutive Sir Reginald with his animal trophies. She scrutinized it for a moment. "Long Shanks!" she exclaimed suddenly.

Lady Sara's two footmen, both of them skilled investigators, spent the next week in Birnley Green, Bury St. Edmunds, and on trains traveling back and forth to London. In London a motley assortment of street people Lady Sara employed when occasion required was turned loose on the area extending south from Hyde Park. Lady Sara herself was supposedly in seclusion for her own safety, but in one disguise or another she was as active as any of her investigators.

A week of this turned up nothing that a learned judge would have deemed worth a glance. We hadn't even found a hint of where Sir Reginald Denty was staying. Finally Lady Sara said, "Enough of this, we'll have to smoke him out." She sent for Chief Inspector Mewer.

The Chief Inspector looked like a man crushed by problems. In the most sensational murder of the year, with all of his superiors calling for progress, he'd had to report daily that there wasn't any. The Home Secretary had even received a note from the King lamenting the failure of the police to make an arrest in the murder of his good friend the Earl of Shernham.

The Chief Inspector listened attentively while Lady Sara expounded the case against Sir Reginald Denty—though I noticed that several times he shifted his feet im-

patiently, and twice he stroked his mustache, the latter being a certain indication with him of stern disapproval.

"I have every investigator available to me at work on this, both in East Anglia and in London," Lady Sara said. "Like you, I am still looking for vital clues. Unlike you, I know exactly what happened."

She described first the years of taunts and insults inflicted on Sir Reginald by the Earl, both in person and in his newspaper, among other things cruelly calling him Long Shanks because of his deformed stature and denigrating the one activity he excelled in, big game hunting.

"Sir Reginald's origin is obscure," Lady Sara said. "So is the source of his income. It would not surprise me if he is the bastard son of the Earl's father, who is said to have sired a large number of such children. In other words, Sir Reginald is the Earl's half brother. The Earl was known as a kindly, considerate man, and his attitude toward Sir Reginald was completely out of character. The old Earl, his father, seems to have given this deformed, illegitimate son the best education possible and treated him with great kindness and generosity. He might have passed to his legitimate son the responsibility for paying Sir Reginald an income. If so, the legitimate son was bitterly resentful of that obligation and also of the fact that this contemptible creature had the claim of kinship on him, and he reacted with taunts and insults. In return, Sir Reginald admired the Earl completely; he was



everything that Sir Reginald was not—handsome, socially successful, wealthy. For years Sir Reginald tolerated the Earl's treatment of him, but finally the bent twig cracked.

"Committing the murder was simple. The Earl, when he was in London, rode in the park each morning like clockwork. Sir Reginald had only to choose the time and place. It was the escape that required meticulous planning. Sir Reginald disguised himself as a street person. He wore stilts to increase his height and to give his body a distorted look. He added a false beard. Probably he'd learned how to paint his face from African natives, and he made use of that skill to achieve a distorting disguise.

"His next step was to find a refuge for himself. As you well know, London has deplorable slums in the area south of Hyde Park in the rear of some of its most respectable streets. Sir Reginald rented not one but two decrepit headquarters in mews there. I have found them both. Of course he is no longer using them.

"He set himself up as a bone-grubber, a bone collector, collecting rags, bottles, and scraps of metal on the side. I suspect he bought a cartload of such material, and his business activity consisted of moving it from one of his locations to the other. He would leave one location with an empty handcart, supposedly to go collecting, proceed to his other location, load his handcart with the discards he had purchased, and leave—supposedly to sell them. He

would return to the first location with what appeared to be the accumulation of an unusually successful day's work. He reversed this process the following day. Several times he had cartloads of tree branches to dispose of—a valuable commodity among the fuel-hungry poor. Neighbours in either location regarded him as hardworking and unusually successful. I have spoken with a dozen people who saw that tall, bearded, and misshapen street person repeatedly, but none of them would be able to recognize the ugly midget Sir Reginald Denty—which shows you how good his disguises were.

"In one of his refuges he hid his second elephant gun, which he had probably purchased abroad and brought to this country secretly. His last trip to Africa was almost a year ago, which gives us some indication of how long he had been planning the Earl's murder.

"His loads of tree branches came from Hyde Park, the product of tree trimmings. Several times Sir Reginald went into the park and brought out a cartload of branches. Once he was challenged, and he produced a signed permit. Probably it was forged.

"Having thus prepared another identity for himself, established a reason for being in the park, and carefully scouted the location he had selected for his crime, he was ready for the murder. In Birnley Green he took sick with malaria several days before the date chosen. The night before, his servant Daudi drove him to the railway station in Bury St. Edmunds, where he



took the train to London. Daudi then returned to Birnley Green and covered for his master's absence, eating any food the housekeeper prepared for him. No doubt Sir Reginald could have made good use of Daudi in London, but a black man is too easily noted and remembered.

"Once he reached London, Sir Reginald slipped into the disguise of his bone-grubber identity, including the beard and stilts, and set out for the park, his elephant gun concealed in his handcart. He loaded the handcart with branches and walked with it some distance along the carriageway, leaving it partly concealed among trees and shrubbery. No one driving by in a carriage would think twice about that evidence of an undergardener at work.

"Sir Reginald worked his way unseen along the line of trees, found the place already chosen for his ambush, and waited. As the Earl approached, he fired one shot. He needed only one. Then he quickly made his way back along the line of trees to his handcart, concealed the gun, and left the park as he had already done several times. Of course no one questioned him. He returned to one of his refuges, left gun and cart there, and returned to Birnley Green, being met in Bury St. Edmunds by the faithful Daudi. His housekeeper found him still in bed with malaria when she went to give him the news about the Earl's murder. Whereupon he arose from his sick bed and hurried to London to give the Earl's household and friends any assistance he could. On

his arrival, the first thing he did was to remove all traces of his occupancy from his two slum refuges and move his elephant gun to a safer hiding place.

"That is the reconstruction of the Earl's murder. Of course Sir Reginald had no idea that I would be on the scene when he shot the Earl. That must have been a shock to him. He knew all about me, you see, from that one case I solved for the Earl. The Earl had talked about me for years as a wizard who could unravel any mystery.

"Poor Sir Reginald! He had committed a perfect murder and made his escape flawlessly, only to discover, when he returned to London, that the wizard Lady Sara had been almost an eyewitness to his crime and had been at work on it from the moment he pulled the trigger. He decided he wouldn't be safe until he eliminated me, and he set about doing so.

"His stalking of me was more impromptu, since he never knew where I was going or when, and he might have made use of hired help. Of course those helpers wouldn't have had the faintest idea what he was up to. Would you like me to expound that stalking?"

The Chief Inspector cleared his throat ostentatiously. "Let's consider your reconstruction of the murder first. What it amounts to is that you're accusing a man of murder who is not only a substantial citizen but a distinguished one, and you describe in great detail exactly how he did it without being able to show me one scrap of evidence. In addition, you are conveniently overlook-



ing evidence to the contrary. I refer to the fact that Sir Reginald's elephant gun was in the hands of the Cambridge gunsmiths at the time of the murder and the attempt on your life, which forces you to invent a second gun for him. Further, you present a scenario that requires almost unbelievably detailed planning. Surely on the basis of such a flimsy case, with no evidence at all, you can't expect me to apply for a warrant and arrest Sir Reginald."

"You couldn't arrest him if you wanted to," Lady Sara said dryly. "You don't know where he is. I expect to have clinching evidence when the time comes to ask for a warrant."

"Where will you get it?"

"Sir Reginald will supply it."

The Chief Inspector was already setting his bulk in motion for departure. Now he settled back into his chair and gaped at her.

Lady Sara explained herself. The Chief Inspector several times exclaimed, "No! I won't allow it!"

"As you said, there is no evidence," Lady Sara said. "Witnesses will place him in Birnley Green at the time of the Earl's murder. Witnesses will testify that his elephant gun has been disabled in Cambridge for weeks and is still there. There is no evidence, anywhere, that he ever possessed a second elephant gun. We have to catch him with that gun in his possession and in the act of committing another crime with it. What I'm suggesting is the only way to do it."

In the end, facing a determined Lady Sara, the Chief Inspector allowed it.

I added my own objection as soon as the Chief Inspector left. "Even if we do everything correctly, you could still end up dead," I said. "What if Sir Reginald's reflexes are faster than mine? With his extensive background in hunting and getting off quick shots, they may very well be."

"You'll have ample support," she said soothingly. "And his reflexes won't be that fast. He will be completely befuddled." She added thoughtfully, "I deplore what the Earl did to him over the years, but of course we can't condone murder and his attempt to murder me proves that he is now completely unhinged both mentally and morally. Tomorrow or next week he might decide someone else is a danger to him. He must be captured quickly."

Lady Sara's plan required publicity, and the London newspapers, without any idea of why she wanted it, were eager to cooperate. She posed for photographs with what was alleged to be a new riding horse Lord Anstee had acquired directly from Arabia. She was to put the horse through its paces in Hyde Park's Rotten Row two days hence, at ten in the morning, and those interested in horses were invited. All of the London papers carried long stories.

We didn't have to wait long for a response. Rick Allward and Charles Tupper were spending their days in carefully chosen places of observation, and they both watched Sir Reginald resume his Hyde Park excursions, again in the role of an undergardener. But with a different disguise—short beard and mus-



tache, face changed completely, and an altered posture—he looked shorter than before. Lady Sara, when she heard their description, opined that he was using shorter stilts. He made his way along the carriageway with a handcart loaded with branches, left the handcart in partial concealment among the trees—exactly as he had done the day of the Earl's murder—and vanished into the row of trees and shrubs that lined the carriageway.

As soon as I caught the signal that he had entered the park, I took up my own position. I was stretched prone in the shrubbery near the place of concealment Sir Reginald had used when he shot the Earl of Shernham. I was virtually invisible to him unless he parted branches and scrutinized the ground, but I could watch his every move through ragged gaps in the shrubbery.

Common sense should have told him that the police would have traced his movements by now. He should have varied his routine drastically for a second Hyde Park murder. We were gambling that he was no longer thinking rationally, and we were right. He came directly to the same hiding place he had used before; he did not even look around. First he removed his stilts. No doubt they would have encumbered him when he fired from one knee. He knelt, sighted along an imaginary rifle, and held the pose for about three seconds. Then he donned his stilts again and quickly departed. Rick and Charles watched him until he left the park.

On the day of Lady Sara's dem-

onstration, Sir Reginald entered the park earlier than before. He took his handcart along the carriageway, parked it, and pretended to be working among the trees. As the time of Lady Sara's ride approached, he slipped away.

I was waiting for him in the same position. There were two differences: he now was carrying his second elephant gun, and I was carrying a large calibre revolver. I found a convenient branch to rest it on, and from that point I kept him covered. If the police slipped up and he actually raised his gun to shoot, he was going to be shot himself before he could pull the trigger.

As happened before, he first removed his stilts. Then he knelt with the gun beside him.

I felt a tug on my foot. That was Chief Inspector Mewer jerking a string to let me know his police were in position. Whatever happened between Sir Reginald and me, the Chief Inspector was going to make certain he couldn't escape. The area was now surrounded by police.

Far up the track Lady Sara appeared. I couldn't see her yet from my prone position, but I saw Sir Reginald suddenly become tense. He did not move his gun, however. It remained upright at his side.

The track was lined with spectators; there were other riders who moved to one side or the other to make way for Lady Sara. As she came closer, I began to catch glimpses of her through the leaves. When she approached the end of the rows of spectators, Sir Reginald slowly raised his gun.

Then he gasped—I could hear his sudden intake of air—and lowered his gun again. A second Lady Sara, dressed exactly the same way and apparently riding a horse that was a twin of the first, overtook Lady Sara and rode past her at a fast clip.

Sir Reginald stared in bewilderment. He had only a few seconds to get off his fatal shot, but he didn't know which Lady Sara to shoot. He started to raise his rifle again.

Four more Lady Saras suddenly entered the track from the sides. Again he lowered his gun bewilderedly. Finally—time was leaking away, and he had to act now or not at all—he slowly raised it to his shoulder and took aim.

We never found out which Lady Sara he decided on. I had already raised my foot, tightening the string and signaling to the Chief Inspector. Now my finger tightened on the trigger, but I didn't need to fire. The Chief Inspector crashed through the shrubbery like the elephant Sir Reginald's gun was designed to shoot. A full half dozen constables closed in. Sir Reginald fought fiercely—and there was enormous strength in that midget frame—but the constables and the Chief Inspector were large men accustomed to such frays. They quickly trussed him up and carried him off.

Lady Sara, accompanied by five replicas of herself, rode up to see the finish of the affair. The five girls imitating her were having a lark. "Really, Sara, you must let us help you with all of your cases," one of them said.

"If Sir Reginald had managed to pull the trigger, this one would have been far less entertaining," Lady Sara said gravely.

That should have been the case, but with Lady Sara the end often was the beginning. Having found out who and what and how, she always wanted to know why. Back we went to Birnley Green and spread out from there, learning as much as we could about the life of Sir Reginald Denty when he was home. It took us three days to find Lucy Sprigg. In the meantime, Chief Inspector Mewer coaxed a confession from Sir Reginald, and by the time Lady Sara called him in for a review of the case, he knew more than we did.

Lady Sara was experiencing an unusual feeling—humiliation. "I had the motive completely wrong," she said.

The Chief Inspector shrugged. "You identified the murderer and caught him. What does it matter if you had the motive wrong?"

"It matters to me."

"I could hardly believe what I was hearing when Sir Reginald told me about her," the Chief Inspector said. "She is only a slatternly barmaid, and she isn't even pretty. She'd had a long series of lovers when she took up with Sir Reginald. By the time the Earl took her away from him, Sir Reginald should have known he wasn't losing much. But it totally unbalanced him."

"Deformed and ugly men like Sir Reginald don't usually have many lovers," Lady Sara said.

~~~~~

"Even so, after he'd good naturedly put up with a lifetime of taunts and insults, this seems like such a trivial thing for a man with a distinguished position in life to commit murder for."

"When a ship hits a rock and sinks, the size of the rock is less important than its effect," Lady Sara said. "But when an individual figuratively hits a rock and has his life shattered, we are puzzled if we perceive it to be a very small rock. Obviously it was sufficient. You might point out in your report that Sir Reginald had been buffeted by rocks all his life. His hull had been weakened, and all it took was one more rock, of whatever size, to sink him."

The Chief Inspector performed an undignified grimace. "If I put anything like that in a report, my superiors would give me thirty

days' leave and send me to an alienist."

After he left, I said to Lady Sara, "I've been thinking of your description of life as a poker game."

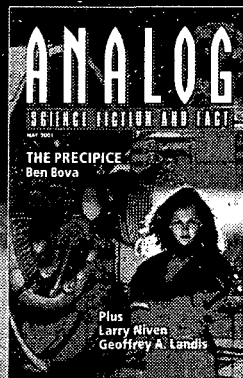
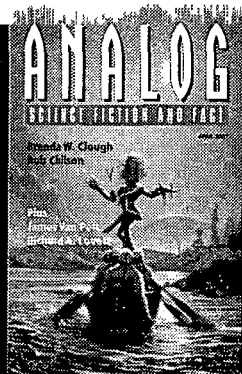
"That was the Earl of Shernham's description. I said life was nothing like that."

"Right. We have to play with the cards that are dealt to us. It seems to me that Sir Reginald played a remarkable game with very poor cards right up to the moment he decided to kill the Earl, and look what it led to."

"You have the proposition reversed," Lady Sara said. "It wasn't Sir Reginald's game that caused the tragedy but the Earl's. The Earl was dealt a near-perfect hand, but a serious character flaw led him to treat his half-brother spitefully. As so often happens, by misplaying the one bad card, he lost the game."

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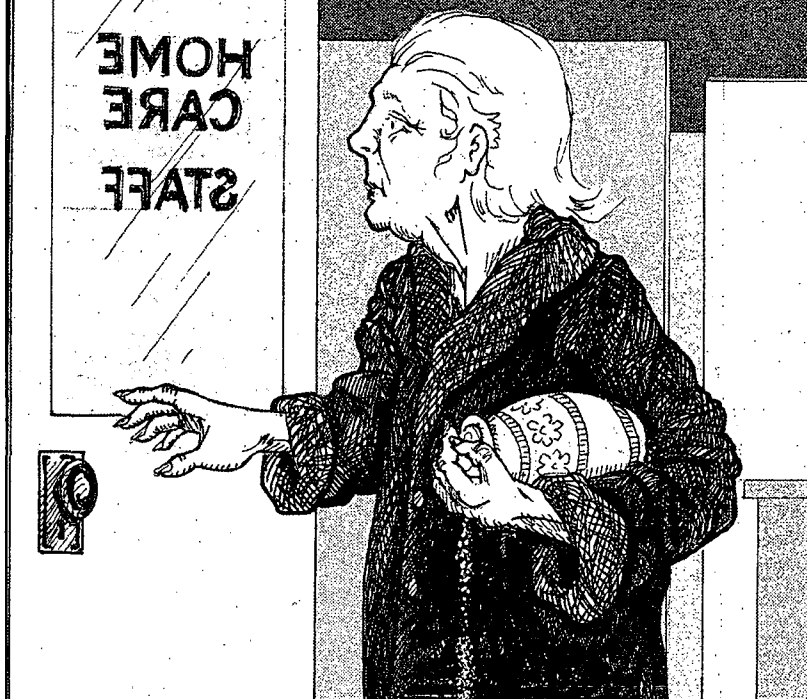
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# Angel Dust

Harriet  
Rzetelny



*You only kill the one you love  
The rest are jes' plain homicides.*

**S**yncopated, with an ear-blasting boom bass that simulated machine guns. *You only BA BA BA kill BA BA the one BA BA BA you love.* A hip-hop song, recorded by a local group, Gowana-Gangstz. They'd named themselves after the Gowanus Expressway, which borders our Brooklyn neighborhood on one side (the river borders it on the other), so it was getting a lot of play in the area. I heard it pounding from a car parked along the avenue as I got to work that morning, and it jangled my nerves. I like to at least start the day with a clear head.

Illustration by Jim Odbert

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Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine 6/01

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Mrs. Canover was waiting for me. Paulina Jablonz, our blonde, blue-eyed receptionist, had clued me when I walked in the door. So as I made my way to my cubicle through the dingy office with its low-hanging fluorescent fixtures, scarred walls, and cracked linoleum, I already knew what to expect.

She was sitting on my one client chair, staring out of her filmy blue eyes at the clock that hung over my desk. "What time is it, Molly dear?" she asked.

"It's nine twenty." I knew she couldn't see the clock.

"I thought your offices opened at nine," she stated reproachfully. Her voice was soft and a little raspy as if she didn't use it very much.

I took off my jacket and hung it on the coat rack. My oak coat rack and my poster of the Arches National Park in Utah are the only two things that distinguish my cubicle from all the other nondescript cubicles in the office. As the only social worker in our Medicaid-funded (read "no frills") home care agency, I think it incumbent upon me to add a little class to the joint.

"That's true, Mrs. Canover," I said as I sat down behind my desk. "Now, what can I do for you?"

The question was actually rhetorical because I knew exactly why she was there and what she wanted. I couldn't do it. She was a gray-haired lady, with fair skin as finely wrinkled as old linen, and she was wearing a royal blue wool coat with frayed sleeves, bought during better times. She clutched her dead husband Herman in her left arm. Not exactly Herman, but his urn.

"You did tell me that you would give me that nice Mrs. Mendez's telephone number, didn't you?" She tried a winsome smile, but it never got past her mouth. Her eyes looked sad and anxious.

I sighed. I'd never told her any such thing. But Mrs. Canover, like so many people, heard only what she wanted to hear. Luisa Mendez had been Herman Canover's home attendant during the last months of his life. When Herman died, Mrs. Canover not only lost her beloved husband, the love of her life, but she also lost Luisa, the person who had become her closest friend, who was there during those final months to comfort and help. Since Mrs. Canover herself was not categorized as medically needy, Luisa had been assigned to a new case. She had told me that the Canovers had no children and that Mrs. Canover had very few friends. But it was a cardinal no-no in home care to give out the home care worker's telephone number to patients or their families. I had had no end of problems when that rule was violated.

"You know I can't do that, Mrs. Canover."

"It's for Herman," she said, shifting the urn a little. "He hasn't passed over yet, I can hear him in the middle of the night."

"You hear him?"

"Yes. Knocking on the pipes and banging on the door. He's desperate

to get out. Mrs. Mendez can help him get to the other side. She's such a calming influence."

I considered. What she thought was Herman's nonpassing was probably Milo, the super of her building, who was allegedly being paid by the landlord, one Josef Kolodny, to harass all the elderly, rent-stabilized tenants so they would decide to move out. Her building was located right by the river, and there'd been a lot of talk about putting in a shopping mall as part of a plan to "revitalize the waterfront." I'd heard that, in order to get in on it, Kolodny had to deliver an empty building to the developers. Not that I'm against revitalization—God knows the neighborhood needs it—but the plan contained nothing at all about building some low-income housing for all the elderly people they'd be kicking out.

"Mrs. Mendez . . ." Mrs. Canover was going on, but I stopped listening because I noticed a sprinkling of something gray on the front of her coat. With a feeling of horror I realized that the seam of the urn had split and Herman was trickling down the worn blue fabric. She probably couldn't see it because of her cataracts. I wondered how much of him was actually left in the urn.

I was just deciding that I would say nothing about Herman when Paulina buzzed to let me know that Leon Kittle was waiting for me. I suggested to Mrs. Canover that she go for lunch at the senior center where, hopefully, she'd make some new friends. I'd made this suggestion before and she hadn't gone, but there wasn't really much else I could do for her. So I ended the conversation as gently as I could and walked her through the office to the door. Maybe I'd try to take her over to the senior center myself some day next week and introduce her around.

Leon Kittle glared at me as we went by. He was sitting on a green plastic chair in what we laughingly called our "waiting area" near the front door. Leon cares for his father, who has Parkinson's disease. When I turned around from seeing Mrs. Canover out, he was already on his feet as if ready to do battle. "It's disgraceful, that's what it is!" he announced.

"Let's go into my office," I said.

I could feel his prickly presence behind me as we threaded our way among the file cabinets towards my cubicle. "What's the problem, Leon?" I asked after we'd both sat down, he in the client's chair and me behind my desk.

He didn't say anything for a minute. Leon was trying to date me, so I figured he wouldn't come out with both barrels blazing. He was maybe five foot two, which is only a couple of inches shorter than me, with spiky hair the color of dirty saffron and an exceptionally well-developed upper torso. The effect was as if too much sausage had been stuffed into too small a casing. It wasn't his height that made me keep him at arms length, although he thought it was. And it also wasn't the agency rule against dating clients or their families, which is the excuse I gave him.



I'd dated client's sons once we were no longer involved with the parent and would do it again if I felt he was the right guy.

"They're threatening to cut him off," he finally said, sucking air into his belly and letting it out with a snort. "Who do these people think they are?"

"What people?"

"These city workers. This one is named Arthur Mbawa. I ask you, what kind of name is that?" Without waiting for an answer he went on. "He told me he'd close my father's case unless we get the recertification papers in immediately. Can you believe that? We're redblooded Americans, both of us, born right here in Brooklyn. My father fought for his country in Korea. What did this Mbawa ever do for this country besides throw people off Medicaid?"

"Leon, we go through this every time. There won't be any problem. We just have to submit another M-11Q. Why are you so upset?"

"It's the principle of the thing. Who is he to be telling me what Donnie can and can't have. I been taking care of him for three years already. I got my rights, too. It makes me sick." Donnie Kittle, Leon's father, got four hours of home care help twice a week from our agency, paid for by Medicaid, and Leon guarded this entitlement as if the entire Medicaid system was marshaling its forces to take it away from him. "And he looks at me like I'm some kind of freak just because I'm short."

"Leon . . ."

"Okay, okay," he said. He smiled and put his hands up to show me he was backing off. "So I'm a little touchy about the way short people are treated in this society."

Leon was more than a little touchy on this subject. He got angry about it the way other people got hungry—at least three times a day, possibly more.

I didn't say this to him. Instead I said, "Why don't I come over tomorrow and we'll fill out the re-cert papers together?" Leon ran a home business, something to do with rewiring computer motherboards, which I didn't understand although he had tried to explain it to me. "It'll only take a few minutes, and then I'll get our doctor to sign it."

He smiled again, his most charming smile, and lifted one eyebrow, which made him look a little rakish. "So, uh, you're ready for that date you've been promising me? Lou Reed is appearing at the Brooklyn Ferry Hall." We'd both discovered at one point that we liked Reed and the Velvet Underground.

"Leon, I never . . ."

"I know, I know, no dates with clients." But his eyes told me as sure as if they'd had a voice that had he been five inches taller the agency rules would go up in smoke.

The next day I'd been at work about half an hour, trying to catch up on my never-ending paperwork, when Paulina buzzed me. "Detective

Carmaggio is on the line.” In that one sentence was a double question: “So are the two of you back together again?” and “Why didn’t you tell me?”

I picked up the phone, determined to stay aloof. “Hello.”

“Hi, Molly, it’s Steve.”

Steve. Hearing his voice after so long sent a surge of pure joy through me, as if I’d released a kite on an updraft and was watching it soar. I didn’t want to feel that way, but there it was.

“How’re ya doing?” he asked.

His voice brought him vividly into my mind. Big, sandy-haired and blue-eyed with a crooked grin and a once good body that was running to fat from all the cheeseburgers and beer he put into it. The last time I’d seen him had been five months ago. We’d had an on and off relationship for a couple of years, but this was the longest we hadn’t seen each other, and it had been at my instigation.

“Not bad, Steve,” I said, trying not to let any feeling into my voice. “And you?”

“Okay, I guess.” Silence. Then: “Do you know a woman named Gladys Canover?”

Uh-oh. “She’s the widow of a former client of ours. Why do you ask?”

“Your name and telephone number are written in big letters on the wall right above her phone.” That’s right. I remembered putting it up there when it was touch and go with Herman. “I caught the case this morning. The super called it in. She was DOA.”

There was a sick feeling in my stomach. “What happened?”

“Somebody bashed her head in.”

“Oh my God!” I blinked back a rush of tears.

“I’m sorry, Molly.” His voice softened immediately. He was sensitive to me that way. “Were you particularly close to her?”

“Not terribly, but I liked her. I just saw her yesterday.” And I could see her so clearly now, sitting in the chair right across from me, clutching the urn with Herman’s remains.

“You were at her apartment?”

“No. She came in here. But I was at her place a number of times when her husband was alive. He’s been dead about five months.” Since just about the time we’d broken up, I thought. Two deaths in three-quarter time—the thought popped into my mind like a counterpoint to the hip-hop song that I kept hearing all over the neighborhood.

“I thought at first it was a B and E,” Steve was saying. “But nothing seems to have been taken. At least nothing that I could see. TV still there. Bag on the table with twenty-two dollars in it.”

“What does her bastard landlord Josef Kolodny say? His goon Milo, the super, has been harassing her.”

“Yeah, we know about him. We’re checking him and that super out.” He was talking in that matter-of-fact way he did when he talked job

talk, and I was finding it so easy just to fall into conversation with him. Now his voice changed. "Uh, Molly . . ."

Uh-oh, I thought. Another guy who wants to get personal.

"I'm wondering if you'd be willing to come over to her house, take a look around, tell me a little about her." When I didn't say anything, he continued, "Just to help me out here." There was a time when I would have done just about anything for him. I didn't want it all starting up again.

"I know you take lunch about one." His voice sounded cajoling, a little seductive. "How about I pick you up, drive you over there . . ."

"Steve, isn't there anyone else who can give you this information?"

Silence. "You tell me who," he said finally, in a flat voice.

I didn't respond, and he said, "What did I ever do to you that you can't even help me with this?" I heard a lot of hurt mixed with the anger. "So we couldn't make it work? Does that make me some kind of pariah?"

He was right. The problems we'd had weren't because of what went down between us—that had always been good. He was funny, intelligent, caring of me—in fact, he was everything I'd always wanted in a man. No, the problems took place in his absence, in the times he'd disappear into alcohol, into the job, into his flashbacks of the Vietnam War, which were consuming him a little bit at a time like a slow-acting acid. During those times the disappointment, loneliness, and anger about it all were more than I could stand, and I'd decided that I'd rather kill off all the feelings I had for him and give myself a chance to meet someone else. Which, despite Leon's efforts, hadn't happened yet.

"I'm sorry, Steve. Of course I'll help, any way I can. I'll meet you outside here at one."

When I stepped out of the office a few minutes after one, he was parked at the curb in his old Ford Taurus. He leaned over and opened the door, a gesture that was so familiar to me that I almost forgot and kissed him after I slid in. But I didn't.

*You only BA BA BA kill BA BA the one BA BA BA you love.* There it was again, blaring out of a kid's boom box as he walked down the block. I felt like crying. The day had gotten very overcast, and the streetlight was on. Steve gave me a tentative smile. In the yellow glare of the lamp his face looked haggard and worn, and I just wanted to put my arms around him. Instead I stared out of the windshield. We barely spoke on the short drive to Mrs. Canover's building.

The apartment was in an old walkup directly across the street from the East River, one of only two that were still standing. It had probably been built before the turn of the last century. On the Manhattan side of the river, glass and steel had replaced the red brick and brownstone that had once lined the waterfront on both sides. Today the river looked cold and steely gray, the color of Steve's gun. He clipped his picture I.D. onto his coat, opened the lobby door, and we walked up the two flights to Mrs.

Canover's apartment. And found Milo outside her door more or less pushing a mop.

Milo always looked and acted like he'd left his brain at the factory for repairs. "No one's allowed here," he said belligerently. He advanced towards us, the mop in front of him as if it were a guard dog.

"NYPD, Detective Carmaggio," Steve said, twisting his I.D. so Milo could see it in the dim light of the hall. "This is a crime scene. What are you doing here?"

Milo deflated as if someone had pulled his plug. "I'm just doing my job," he whined. "You guys left this place a mess."

"Detective Antonio talk to you yet?"

Milo nodded and immediately took off down the steps. "I made my statement," he called behind him.

"That oughta be fun to read," Steve muttered. He broke the seal on the apartment door, and I followed him in expecting to see . . . what? The light was on. The dark, heavy furniture was much too large for the small apartment. China shepherd and shepherdess, facing each other from the big end tables across the couch. TV set on a cabinet across the room. Matted and framed photographs hanging on the walls—winding Italian streets, a veiled Moroccan woman, an ancient stone church. Herman had been an art photographer among other things, and had had several of his photographs published in *Life* magazine. I knew from having reviewed his finances for Medicaid that he had not been successful. But Mrs. Canover had loved him, and that was all that mattered to her. Why couldn't it be enough for me?

It all looked so ordinary, I thought, except for the dusting of fingerprint powder on the surfaces, and a big wine-colored blotch on the linoleum-covered floor. There were some chalk marks around it. I turned my face away. "Where is Herman's urn?" I asked.

"If you mean the crematorium urn, it was on the floor next to her when she was found. There were some fingerprints on it that weren't the DOA's, and it's been bagged for evidence."

I told him about Herman's ashes dribbling down Mrs. Canover's coat in the office. "She was a very isolated lady," I said. "Her husband was the love of her life. They traveled all over the world together and came back here to live a few years ago, just before Herman got sick. They didn't seem to need anyone besides each other." Is this where having a one-and-only love left you at the end? I felt a wave of sadness. "I can't think of anyone else who would've done this, besides Milo and Kolodny."

Steve was opening drawers and rifling through their contents. "Did she have any jewelry? She had a wedding ring on her finger but no engagement ring."

"I never saw her wear an engagement ring," I said. "We can ask Luisa Mendez." He turned to me with a question in his eyes. "She was the home care worker who took care of Herman before he died," I said. "You

should talk to her anyway. She knew Mrs. Canover much better than I did."

He took a notebook out of his pocket, flipped it open, and wrote something. "You got a phone number for her?"

I said I'd call it in to him when I got back to the office.

"If these are pictures of her, she was a goodlooking woman." He was leafing through the pages of an album. I peered over his shoulder. There were several pictures, artistically shot, of a woman who must have been Gladys Canover. You could see the resemblance, but it was still hard to reconcile the young woman she'd been with the old one I'd known. Steve was right. She had been a beauty.

He turned the page, and there was a picture of Mrs. Canover seated on a chair. A dark-haired man was standing next to her with his arm around her shoulder. There was almost no resemblance in this picture of young Herman to the decimated old man that lung cancer had finally finished off. But the big surprise was that both Mr. and Mrs. Canover were smiling down at a baby cradled in her arms.

"I never knew she had a baby!" I exclaimed.

"Maybe it wasn't hers," Steve said. "Could have been a niece or nephew."

I shook my head. "I just know it's her baby. I've always felt there was something very sad about her, and this explains it. The baby must have died."

A ghost of Steve's crooked grin played around his mouth, but he didn't argue with me. He knew my intuition was right more often than it was wrong. He picked up a handful of receipted bills and bank statements and began going through them, but if he found anything that interested him, he didn't mention it. Just as I was thinking about leaving, he looked at his watch and said, "So, are we okay? Can we have a bite to eat before I drive you back to work?"

I needed to have lunch. Besides which I had Leon Kittle on tap for the afternoon, and I was in no hurry for another jockeying session with him. I nodded and in a few minutes we found ourselves in Vito's eating pizza.

"So I'm investigating the death of this pharmacist who got whacked on Bedford Avenue last week," he said after we'd talked a little more about Mrs. Canover and he'd finished his first slice of pepperoni with extra cheese. "You must have heard about it." I nodded. "And I'm questioning this skell—actually I know he's the doer because the surveillance camera picked him up. He's got a yellow sheet as long as a roll of toilet paper. And he's not denying it. But what he says is that a cop told him to do it. 'A police officer told you to whack the pharmacist?' I ask. 'No, that was just an accident,' he says."

Steve signaled to the waitress to bring him another beer. That made three. I wished I didn't feel compelled to keep track, but I did. "He tells me that his last arrest was for possession of PCP, on which he was high

at the time." PCP is otherwise known as angel dust. "You know what PCP does to people. One minute they think they've got superhuman power, and the next they're jumping off the roof." I nodded again. "Well, in the course of trying to subdue him, the arresting officer tells him he should go on Prozac. So when he gets out after doing his time, our hero decides that Prozac is just what he needs to stay clean and sober. Unfortunately, while he's trying to cop some, the pharmacist walks in on him." The waitress came over with the beer, and Steve took a long gulp. The mug was half empty when he put it back down on the table.

"He tells me he's very sorry the pharmacist got it," Steve went on, "but he doesn't think I should arrest him. 'Why not?' I ask. 'Because,' he says, 'Prozac is not an illegal substance.'"

Despite myself I started to laugh. Steve picked up another slice of pizza, chewed for a minute, and then went on. "'And besides which,' he adds, 'I really didn't mean to kill the old guy.'" His eyes turned heavenward as if hoping some higher authority would help him understand the vagaries of his fellow beings. "Can you believe this? It's like, if I didn't walk into that drugstore meaning to kill him, the fact that he ends up dead is just some accident and shouldn't count."

His hand was resting on the table. For a moment our eyes met and I knew that all I had to do was put my hand down on top of his and we could be right back in bed with each other, but he was leaving it up to me. I wanted it so badly it scared me. Instead I looked at my watch and said, "Steve, I've got to get back to work."

"Okay, Molly. Whatever you say."

He paid the bill and drove me over to the Kittles' apartment, which was located near the expressway. Franca Donato, the home care worker, let me in.

"I have an appointment with Leon for re-cert."

Franca, who was shaped somewhat like a large-sized kidney bean, was usually the friendliest of people. At the mention of Leon's name her eyes narrowed. "He's at the gym. You know." Her thick arms encased in their pink sweater extended out and went up and down, up and down, in the classic weightlifter's motion. "He'll be home soon."

"How are things going?"

"Mr. Kittle is doing just fine." She smiled a little. "He's a sweet ol' man. Only that son of his is driving me crazy." The smile faded, and two lines appeared above her nose. "He was on his computer before he left, and the language that was coming out of his mouth..."

Leon maintained a website called Shorty.com in which he collected and published examples of discrimination against short people—everything from elevator buttons that were too high for short people to reach to the absence of clothing made for short men. Having to buy his pants in the boys' Husky department was a source of continual outrage. He also believed that the tall people in the world were systematically killing



off the short people. ("Look at how Northern Europeans have slaughtered the native populations!") I'd tried telling him once that it was his *obsession* with being short that got in the way of his relationships, not his shortness. But it fell on deaf ears.

Franca pursed her lips and began reciting the mantra that was her answer to all of life's problems: "I am a Christian woman, thank Jesus, and He will see me through."

She went into the kitchen, and I walked into the living room to chat with Donnie Kittle. He was seated in a wheelchair near a low sofa. The decor in the room ran to deep leather seats, glass, and chrome—Leon's taste, I thought, rather than his father's. Donnie was in his late sixties, gaunt with sparse white hair and the tremors associated with Parkinson's disease.

"M-Miss Molly," he said, giving me his version of a smile.

"Hi, Mr. Kittle."

"D-Donnie."

"Donnie."

He had a photo album open on his lap, and he was slowly turning the pages, his fingers caressing the snapshots as if they were priceless objets d'art. Photographs are an integral part of my clients' lives. They serve as a spur to memory—the good times and the not-so-good times, the children sent off into the world, the hardships endured and survived. But most important, they are the sacred icons of the dead. I love to hear the stories my clients tell about their pictures. It's like looking deep into a tidal pool and seeing the richness and variety of life that lives just below the surface. So I was about to pull up a chair and ask him about them when Leon walked into the room. He nodded his hello to me, glanced at his father, and scowled.

"Looking at those old pictures again?" He took the album out of his father's hands, snapped it shut, and put it down on the coffee table. "Donnie lives more in the past than he does in the present," he said to me. "I don't think it's good for him."

Tears were starting down the old man's face. "Mother . . . father . . . everyone gone."

"I'm still here," Leon growled at him as if he were challenging his father to deny this fact. "Your only son."

"All gone . . . Glad . . ."

"Yeah, yeah, I know you're glad I'm here," Leon interrupted, shrugging his massive shoulders as if he were conceding something not terribly important to him. Franca went over to the old man, reached into the pocket of her apron for a tissue, and started wiping away the tears on his cheeks as if he were a baby. Then she put the album back on his lap. Leon glared at her and looked as if he were about to say something very unchristian.

"Leon, come here a minute," I said gently, pulling him into the corner,

away from Franca and his father. "The pictures come from a time when he was young and healthy. He's got a lot of grieving to do over all those lost people, and the self he was back then and isn't any more. The pictures help him do it."

"There you go with all that social work crap," Leon said, trying to smile but not quite making it. His eyes moved over to the closed album, or maybe it was his father's fluttering fingers he saw on the faded leatherette cover, and for a moment he looked like a lost little boy himself. There must be a lot of Leon's past in that album, too, I thought.

We completed the Medicaid papers in short order, and I took my leave. It was raining now, and people were hurrying off the streets and into shelter. I looked down at the Styrofoam cups and crumpled food wrappers floating in the water that had collected in the gutter and felt very sad. Mrs. Canover's death and my lunch with Steve had left me more shaken than I would have imagined. You really don't want to start things up with him again, I thought. But a sudden image came into my mind of myself, enveloped all in black like an ancient widow, crying by the side of an unmarked grave.

I got back to the office and called Steve's home, where I knew he wouldn't be, and left the number of Mrs. Canover's home care worker, Luisa Mendez, on his answering machine. I didn't ask him to call me back, so of course he wouldn't. Over the next few days I heard through the grapevine that Milo had been arrested and released. Gladys Canover's death had received no media coverage at all. The hip-hop song kept echoing in my head. *The rest are jes' plain homicides*. Who really cares about another random murder—besides the people who knew the victim and loved her, of course? But nobody loved Mrs. Canover any more.

It was during the next week that I got a call from Franca. "I'm in the bodega next door," she said in a frightened voice. "They been arguing for hours, and I'm worried he's gonna do some harm to the old man. I think you should come."

Of course the phone rang as soon as I hung up. A doctor I had been trying to reach for over a week. So I had to talk to him. When I finally got to the Kittles' apartment, Leon had gone out. Donnie was sitting in his wheelchair with the photograph album open on his knees.

"Leon threw the album into the garbage," Franca said, whispering as if Leon were still in the room. "But the old man was so upset I went down and brought it back up."

I pulled over a chair and sat down next to him. "Franca tells me that you and Leon have been fighting. Can you tell me what the problem is?"

But he couldn't, or wouldn't, say. His body was shaking much more than it usually did. Probably frightened, I thought. So to calm him down and because I was really interested I said gently, "Would you show me the pictures?"

His fingers, as fluttery as feathers in the wind, ran up and down the

photos as if he could see them better through his skin than he could through his eyes. I glanced at the images his fingers were caressing. A young dark-haired man in a bathing suit. Herman Canover. The same man, standing next to Gladys Canover, who was squinting into the sun with the waves rolling in behind them. Gladys Canover? What were Herman and Gladys Canover doing in Donnie Kittle's photo album?

"I didn't know you knew . . ." I looked at Donnie a little more closely. He was an older version of the man in the photos Steve and I had looked at in Mrs. Canover's apartment. All of a sudden the whole thing snapped into place. It was Donnie I had seen in Gladys Canover's album, smiling down at her and their child, not Herman.

I sat back, amazed at the coincidence. But then, it wasn't really so much of a coincidence. Many of the old people who'd lived all their lives in the neighborhood or, like Gladys Canover, returned after many years, had histories together that went way, way back. The old neighborhood was in some ways like a tree with numerous limbs and branches all growing from one root system. I'd uncovered some surprising interrelationships more than once as I'd looked through my elderly clients' photographs.

"I thought I threw those albums away!" Leon's voice. He'd come up behind us. I glanced up at him. He was wearing an open jacket over a T-shirt that said **SHORT ON THE OUTSIDE. BIG ON THE INSIDE.** He grabbed the album from his father and shut it with a bang. "Franca," he yelled. "Did you take those albums out of the garbage?"

"Donnie asked me to," she said, her chin jutting out as if daring him to say anything now that I was there.~

"You disobeyed me!" Leon shouted. What was bugging him? I'd seen him annoyed and angry but never quite like this. He started pacing up and down the room. Unfortunately, because of his top-heavy physique, he ended up looking very much like a bantam rooster strutting his stuff. I began to get a glimmer of how his physical appearance really did prevent people from taking him seriously.

"I threw those albums away for a reason. It's unhealthy for him to live in the past." A muscle on the side of his face began twitching as if it had a life of its own.

"Listen, Leon," I said, trying for the reasonable approach. "If your father wants his photo album, that's his right. Wouldn't you feel the same way if someone tried to take something away from you?"

Throughout all this the idea that had started forming in my head was taking definite shape. It truly upset me. I had always basically liked Leon, although not in a romantic way. I understood now why he'd been so upset when he'd been in my office the week before. It wasn't me or the Medicaid worker he was angry at, it was Gladys Canover.

I pointed to her picture and asked gently, "Was this lady your mother?"

Donnie, in the background, made a sound, and we all turned and looked at him. He was nodding. "My w-wife . . . Leon's m-mother."

"She hasn't been your wife for years," Leon shouted. "She left you. She left *us*. Never even visited. Why would you even *want* to keep that picture?"

Tears started down the old man's face.

"You're hurting your father," Franca chided, placing her hands upon her ample hips. "He still talks about Gladys all the time," she said to me. "I don't think he ever got over her running away with another man." She lowered her voice. "You know how men are about these things."

I suddenly thought back to the visit I'd made to the Kittles the week before. Donnie was talking about all the people who were lost to him. He was probably going to add Gladys to the list, but Leon had cut him off and had pretended Donnie was actually saying "glad" instead of "Gladys." For all he knew then, the murder might have made the papers, and he didn't want me making any connections between his father and Mrs. Canover. That was also why he tried to throw the albums away.

Leon had given up arguing with his father and was now arguing with the ceiling. "She couldn't bear to *look* at me, her misshapen son who wouldn't grow. That's why she left."

"She left when Leon was a baby," Franca explained to me. "Donnie told me he raised Leon himself, just like a mother."

My heart felt like it was attached to a lead weight that was pulling it down into my stomach. I didn't want any part of this, but I couldn't stop myself from going on.

"Leon," I said, flatly. "You know what happened to your mother last week, don't you?"

Donnie's whole body was shaking from head to foot, like an aspen in a windstorm. "H-happened. W-what happened?"

How would Donnie have learned about it? It never got on TV or into the papers, and if what I was thinking was correct, Leon wouldn't have told him. I took his hand and said as gently as I could, "I'm sorry about this, Donnie, but Gladys was killed last week." His hand, so thin and light, felt like the trembling wing of a baby bird.

"Killed?" Franca said, whirling around to face Leon with blazing eyes. "Did you know about this?"

"She thinks she's God's gift to a dust mop and we can't live without her," Leon continued his debate with the ceiling. "That's why she *talks* to me this way."

"What *do* you know about it, Leon?" I asked. But I already knew the terrible truth.

He wouldn't look at me.

"Leon?"

Why was I going on with this? I should just call Steve and let him handle it.

"She was my mother," he said, lowering his head and looking at the floor. "But she never said two words to me."

"You saw her in my office that day," I said. I realized there was something I needed to understand here, and that I couldn't leave until I did. "You knew who she was."

He finally looked at me. Then, as if he couldn't contain it any more, it came pouring out: "What was the *matter* with her?" It was cry of a lost child. "Her and that creepy urn. He was *dead*, and she's carrying on like he's in the room." For a moment his eyes flared up and he said again, "I was her son, and she never said two words to me."

I heard a sharp intake of breath and glanced at Franca. She was staring at Leon as if she'd overturned a rock and found a mass of slimy, crawly things.

"Who would even *want* to have a mother like her?" He spat out the words as if they were choking him.

Suddenly he collapsed onto the sofa, his legs giving way as if they no longer had the power to keep him upright. I had a strange, disjointed thought: he had chosen a low sofa so that his feet could touch the ground when he sat on it.

"Why, Leon?" I asked. "What happened that night?"

He studied his hands. His fingers were short and stubby like his legs, his fingernails bitten to the quick. He was silent for a long time. Then he said softly, "When I first saw her on the street a couple of years ago, I knew just who she was, from the pictures in the album. I started following her around. And she used to pretend like she didn't even see me."

"She probably didn't see you," I said. "She had cataracts."

"I mean, I may be short," he continued, off on his own track again, "but I'm still a *human being* on this earth."

"Did you ever approach her and tell her who you were?"

"Aren't mothers supposed to know their own sons?" he said and the pain behind his words cut right through to my heart. Then he shrugged. In that one movement I could see all the hurt and despair in his life. How could he have introduced himself and taken the risk of her rejecting him again? So he never had.

"And that night? What happened?"

"I saw her in your office. She wouldn't even *look* at me. That was the last straw. I decided to pay her a visit, to tell her Donnie was sick and that she had to take care of him."

Donnie made a sound halfway between a moan and a cry.

"She *married* you, didn't she?" he snapped at his father. "Why should I have the whole burden?"

Franca dropped down in front of Donnie and took his trembling hand. "Don't you let him upset you," she crooned.

"He's not a *baby*, for godsakes!" Leon exploded. "You're always treating him like he's a baby." Franca ignored him.

"Then what happened?" I asked.

He closed his eyes, but he couldn't stop the words from coming any more than I could stop trying to understand. "So I knock on the door and she opens it. But before I could say anything, she starts waving that damned urn at me and babbling about spirits."

"She thought that he hadn't passed over yet," I said sadly. "She probably thought you were a spirit." Or an imp or a gnome, which he did resemble.

"It was all so *stupid*. Next thing I know, she's screaming, 'Herman! Herman!,' like he was still there."

"She thought he was. She was being tormented by her super, who banged on her pipes at night and knocked on her door all the time," I said. "But she didn't know that. She believed it was all due to the fact that Herman's spirit hadn't passed over yet." She must have loved him so much, I thought. I was near tears although I barely knew why.

"And meanwhile, he's spilling out all over her *dress*," he went on as if her untidiness was the thing that finally sent him over the edge. "She was such a freaking *mess* I couldn't stand . . . for her to live."

"That's a reason to kill her?" Franca threw it at him like she was tossing a grenade. He didn't answer her.

It was strange. He'd done a terrible thing, but I couldn't hate him. *You only kill the one you love*. That damn song again. Steve's face popped into my mind. This conversation wasn't about murder, I realized; it was all about love. "Did you love her, Leon?"

"Did I love her?" He looked at me as if he weren't sure what planet I came from. "I didn't even *know* her. Besides which, what the hell *is* love, anyway?"

Had he loved her? Did I love Steve? The question echoed around in my head like the ghost of something so exquisite, I almost couldn't bear to touch it. Love is like angel dust, I thought suddenly, thinking about the story Steve had told me. It can make you ecstatic one minute, totally miserable and angry the next. Loving Steve was just like that. And it was way too painful a way to live. So I kept trying to kill him off and find someone safe and predictable.

I was thinking how absurd the whole thing was. Then I heard a sound. Leon. His head had dropped down onto his arms, and he was weeping. The sobs were coming from a place so deep that his whole body shook with them.

I picked up the phone and dialed Steve's number.



# THE MYSTERIOUS PHOTOGRAPH



Hulton / Liaison Agency

A briefcase, or A Brief Case? We will give a prize of \$25 to the person who invents the best mystery story (in 250 words or less, and be sure to include a crime) based on the above photograph. The story will be printed in a future issue. Reply to AHMM, Dell Magazines, 475 Park Avenue South, New York, New York 10016. Please label your entry "June Contest," and be sure your name and address are written on the story you submit. If possible, please also include your Social Security number.

The winning entry for the January Mysterious Photograph contest will be found on page 141.

FICTION



# HARRY'S LAMENT

Bentley Dadmun

*Illustration by Linda Weatherly*

*Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine 6/01*

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**I** squirmed against the maple, trying to find a spot where the bark wouldn't dig into my back. Cat, apparently weary of people-watching, chasing leaves, and lusting after the birds fluttering above her head, climbed onto my chest, put her bad paw against my lips, and went, "Errrr?"

I opened one eye, gently took her paw off my lips, put a finger between her big bright eyes, and said, "Give me another twenty minutes, and we'll go to Gretchen's." Naturally she didn't understand a word I said, except perhaps Gretchen's, but got the tone and knew that she would be eating something soon. I closed the eye and felt her settle against my chest for a bit of grooming.

I dozed off again, but a minute or two or ten later, odd sounds woke me. Heavy steps, followed by dragging noises, all accompanied by pain-filled grunts. I knew those sounds. I heard them every so often here in the park, and I usually ignored them. But this time I couldn't, for the noises were coming my way.

The sounds stopped. Cat pressed against my chest and let out a mournful yowl. I sighed inwardly, took a deep breath, and opened my eyes.

Jerome Prouty looked down at me with dark, sunken eyes that spoke of a thousand hours of pain. His big lumpy body hung from shoulders that didn't seem up to the task, and his large head, with the sagging gray flesh of his face, appeared at first glance like a botched potter's job. And the scars

... Jerome Prouty was as scarred as Cat, vivid white swaths that cut across the left side of his head and face like the strokes of a mad painter. His right foot, cranked out at a forty-five degree angle, was steel below the cuff of his worn, soiled pants.

For the past two years Jerome had been a fixture around town, pushing his way through a life nobody wanted to know about. When Jerome forced himself down the street or came to the park, people tended to look away or suddenly be in a hurry. And I was no exception. A conversation with Jerome was a task, a task I had little patience for and avoided.

I pasted a smile on my face, kneaded Cat's neck, and said, "Good afternoon, Jerome, how goes your day?"

He stuck out an arm and started to sink. As he sank, he grunted, stuck his artificial foot and ankle straight out, and sort of fell into a half-reclining position in front of me. Cat, startled by the operation, meowed and crawled into the sling across my chest. Jerome took a deep breath and in a halting, rasping voice said, "Chief Morin told me to go away again. Said he'd done all he could and he was tired of me hanging around. Saw Officer Worthen, and she said maybe I should talk to you. She said maybe you'd help me."

The smile froze on my face. Thinking fast, I said, "I don't know how I could help you, Jerome, even if I had the time, which I don't. I'm sorry."

Those haunted eyes blinking

rapidly, he stared at me a moment, rubbed his head with both hands, and blurted out, "The—the thing is, I'm gonna be dead soon. I'm gonna be dead sometime pretty soon." He slapped his head with an open palm. "The car hitting me—damaged a bunch of stuff in my head, and now I got two bubbles in there and they're going to explode sometime pretty soon and kill me, and before I die, I want to know who hit me and why they hit me, and the police said they've done everything they can and can't do any more and Officer Worthen said I might talk to you 'cause you're a smart bastard and might find something out." Tears slid down that pasty, lumpy face. "It'd be kinda nice to know who killed me. It'd be kinda nice to know why I was killed."

We stared at each other. Finally I reached out and gripped his shoulder. "If the police can't find out who tried to kill you, I'm certainly not going to. I'm sorry, Jerome, but I don't see what I can do."

Pushing my bike, I turned off Main Street into a narrow alley. Near the end of the alley, recessed in dirty brick, is a large, windowless door that appears to have a terminal disease. Stuck to the bricks above the door is an unpainted two by six with GRETCHEN'S RESTAURANT handprinted on it in trembling black letters.

I put the front tire of the bike against the door and pushed. It reluctantly opened, and clutching the handlebars, I charged through it before it could slam shut and maim the bike or the trailer hooked to it.

Gretchen's is a pleasant walk back in time. Her hamburgers weigh half a pound after frying, her specials overflow a dinner plate, and you can stick a spoon upright in her soups. I like to occupy one of the big booths, where I sip bad wine and read or think. Cat prefers the counter. She has a taste for sugared black coffee and limps along the battered Formica seeking the steaming brew from tolerant patrons.

Cat was in luck. I saw Betty Worthen perched on an end stool staring into the infinite depths of her cup. I plunked down on the stool beside her and helped Cat onto the counter. Gretchen, who was slicing onions and dropping them in the huge kettle simmering on the stove, glanced my way, and I raised my eyebrows. She nodded, dropped the rest of the onion into the kettle, poured me a large glass of wine, and put it down in front of me. Usually she's pretty chatty, but this time she just grunted, gave Betty a look that would wilt grass, and stalked back to her kettle. Apparently Gretchen, who ignores parking meters, had gotten yet another ticket and was giving Betty the treatment. This is not a rare occurrence.

I turned to Betty, put a finger in her coffee, and flicked a few drops in her face. "A pox on you, Officer Worthen."

She avoided my gaze, focusing instead on Cat, who put her head in Betty's cup and noisily lapped up a little coffee. She emerged, gave my hand a quick lick, and limped along the counter to check things out.

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Betty sighed. Thick and post-menopausal, she still wore her blue uniform with authority and dignity despite years of dealing with the human adventure at its worst. Although philosophically from opposite sides of the tracks, we've been friends for years and have traded enough favors over those years that such concepts as rules and laws seldom come between us. She sighed again and looked at me. "I take it you saw Jerome."

"I did. Jesus, Betty, telling that poor bastard I might be able to help him! He looked at me with those eyes and—" I threw up my hands and muttered, "Jesus, Betty."

She tapped the back of my hand with a thick finger. "As you may know, two years ago around ten p.m. Jerome was walking along Birch Street. It was raining and foggy. Someone drove over the curb across a grass strip and nailed him. He spent almost a month in a coma, and it was another eight or nine months before he was back on his feet, or foot if you care to look at it that way.

"I happened to have switched shifts with Bobby Wheeler that night and was the second cop on the scene." After a moment's silence she continued, "I would've bet anyone a hundred dollars that Jerome wouldn't last the night." She signaled to Gretchen, then shook her head. "We looked pretty hard, checked every bodyshop up to the Mass. border, hassled every new and used car dealer in central New Hampshire, and interviewed I don't know how many people. We even got the town and county to post a

reward for information leading to an arrest. Obviously we came up empty."

Gretchen, a steaming pot in one hand and a dripping ladle in the other, marched up and poured Betty more coffee, expertly spilling a bit on her hand in the process. Then she turned and stomped back to her kettle. Betty licked the coffee off the back of her hand and stared a moment at the red spots. "To carry Justice's torch often requires stoic dignity and patience," I said.

She gave me a sideways look and said, "So now Jerome, who was never a bright light to begin with, has an IQ about thirty points lower than it was, lives in a tiny room at Teller's Hotel, is occasionally paid attention to by his mother, which might or might not be a good thing, and is waiting for one of those aneurysms to blow." She leaned back from the counter and pulled a brown envelope out of the front of her pants. "I just happen to have made some notes of the pertinent parts of the investigation. I'd give you a direct copy, but we have this new software that wants the name and number of anyone requesting hard copies and I haven't figured out how to bypass it yet."

"Betty, why on earth would you even think that I'd consider such an endeavor? That sort of thing is for professionals with expertise and resources. Telling Jerome that I'd try it, which I have no intention of doing, is ludicrous, and allowing him to believe that I would was wrong. I told him it was a no go. I told him I didn't have the time."

"And I bet when you told him you

didn't have the time you were slumped against some tree taking the sun and drinking the grape." She sipped her coffee and stared at the milk cooler. Finally she put her cup down. "Jerome is one of the people on life's sidelines. When he was in high school and I had after-school traffic duty, I'd let him sit in the squad car until I was through, and then I'd drive him home. Otherwise he could end up with another bloody nose or black eye." Her jaw muscles bunched several times. "He never had any friends that I knew of, never got invited to parties, was teased to hell and gone, and generally has had a truly crappy life. Now, I know you're not going to find the bastard who hit him, but I'd like someone to pay attention to that hapless piece of humanity until one of those things in his head blows and he can finally get a little peace. And from what I understand, that's not going to be too long."

"Why the hell doesn't he go to the hospital and have a surgeon fix them?"

"The hit-and-run costs were over four hundred thousand, and nobody paid. His mother is fairly well off, got a bundle from her husband when he up and stroked out, but she refused to pay because it would have bankrupted her. And since Jerome was an adult, there was nothing the hospitals could do. He sure as hell doesn't have any current health insurance, and I don't even want to think what a few hours of neurosurgery and a couple of weeks in a hospital would cost. Now, if he were to have a cerebral accident,

one that didn't kill him, the hospitals would have to do something. But that's a long shot, a very long shot."

Cat, finding slim pickings, limped back down the counter, took a few laps of Betty's coffee, put her good paw against my chest, and went, "Errrrr." I helped her into the sling, where she squirmed and fussed and got things just right and settled in for a nap. Cat is quite the expert when it comes to naps. Betty and I sipped at our drinks in silence until the little radio Velcroed to her epaulet cracked and informed her that there was a domestic dispute at Miller's Mobile Home Park. She carefully put on her hat, touched my shoulder, and left.

When Gretchen looked my way, I raised my eyebrows and pointed to my empty glass. As she filled it from a gallon jug of her finest, she muttered, "Hanging about with that woman is gonna get you nothing but trouble. She's got the eyes of a lizard and a heart of lead."

Since I've heard it all before, numerous times, I ignored that judgment and asked, "Do you know Jerome Prouty?"

She picked up my glass and downed a quarter of my wine. "Life always produces its share of poor bodies that never make the cut, and Jerome's one of them. Hear he's gonna croak on account of that hit 'n' run." She took another drink. "Before that mess he used to come in all the time, nearly every day. Still comes in every once in a while. Likes fried ham sandwiches with lots of mustard. Gives me the shivers looking at them scars and



watching him drag that steel foot across my floor."

She nodded at Cat, whose tail was hanging out of the sling.

"He reminds me of Cat," she said. "I usually talk with him some, not like I used to but, Jesus, I feel sorry for him. He can't remember the month either side of that hit 'n' run and hasn't a clue as to why someone would wanta do something like that to him."

She pulled a long cigarette out of her apron pocket, lit it with a three inch flame from a hissing Bic lighter, and coughed several times. "And neither can I. Imagine, just imagine. You're walking down the street minding your own business and some sonofabitch bails over the curb and puts you in a coma. And when ya come out of the coma? You hurt. Every hour of every day you hurt."

She blew smoke out her nostrils, shook her head, and shuffled back to her kettle.

I moved Cat and myself to a booth, where I sipped wine and, to avoid thinking about Jerome, read a two-day-old copy of the *Gazette*, which produced a pain of its own. After a final glass of the grape I put a sleeping Cat in her trailer, covered her with my ex-wife's beloved quilt, and headed home. As I came out of the alley, I looked across the street and saw Jerome slumped on a bench by the rail fence that surrounds the park. He seemed to be looking at me, so I raised my hand and gave a tentative wave. After a moment he raised his arm and gave a spastic, floppy-armed wave back.

People who plan ahead can retire in Arizona, Florida, the Caribbean, or wherever. People who don't and suddenly find themselves in their declining years with only a Social Security check to sustain them end up at a place like Teller's Hotel, or if they're lucky, a small room in their son's or daughter's house. And a few end up at The Farm, where the animals that are left are kept in a shed and the humans live in the barn or in one of the battered trailers or R.V.'s scattered about the pastures. Annie Kokar, the caretaker of the eighty or so souls who ended up on her two hundred acres seven miles from anywhere, oversees everything and manages to hold things together with a fistful of Social Security checks, astute planning, and balls.

I've lived at The Farm for a number of years, but not in the barn or in one of the battered R.V.'s. I live in a thirty-six foot mahogany sailboat cradled in a small grove of hardwood out in the north pasture. The boat was stripped long ago of relevant hardware like a mast, rudder, and keel, but she still puts a stoic face to the wind and provides a safe berth away from the teeming masses and their follies.

I stepped down into the main cabin, put Cat on the floor, and rummaged around for something for us to eat. Cat as usual demanded to be fed first. As I was filling her bowl, she pushed against my legs, pulled at my shoelaces with her good paw, purred, yowled, meowed, and finally did a stiff roll onto her back and waved both front paws at

me. This for a bowl of little brown pellets that, if the label is to be believed, contained an astonishing array of nutrients and tasted like a cat's version of heaven.

I dined on steamed asparagus, a bowl of Cheerios, and a mug of Lancers rosé.

After supper I poured another mug of Lancers and slumped on the settee with a book called *The Aging Brain*. Since I happen to possess such an item, I was curious to see what the latest opinions were pertaining to that jellied mass behind my eyes.

Later I had a final mug of wine in a futile attempt to wash away a deep melancholia. I'd not only learned about my own brain, I'd learned more than I wanted to know about the devastation in Jerome Prouty's brain. Saddened and depressed, I shuffled off to bed.

Cat, as per her habit, stayed up and prowled the primordial dark of the cabin, played with her toys, and stared out the window behind the settee. Sometime in the night she came into the forward cabin, pulled on the blanket, and meowed softly. With what has become an automatic gesture, I picked her up, set her on the bed, and flopped back down. She made her way to the pillow, spent a noisy quarter hour cleaning herself, fussed and pawed at her third of the pillow until it was just right, settled down and purred in my ear until she dropped off.

The next morning I decided to eat at the barn. After feeding Cat her morning bowl of little brown pellets, I put her in the sling, and

we made the hike across the pasture to the big multipurpose room on the second floor of the barn. I was standing in line anticipating a stack of buckwheat pancakes peppered with wild blueberries when Annie appeared, scruffed Cat's head, and muttered, "Betty Worthen called. She said to tell you Jerome Prouty is in the ICU."

The intensive care nurse was around my age and about half my weight and had the eyes of a marine who had done too many combat tours. She folded her arms and looked at me. "Are you related? Outside of Officer Worthen, you're the only one who's shown up."

I hesitated, then said, "Yes, I am."

"Very well, follow me please." She pushed open double doors with blaring DO NOT ENTER and SEE THE CHARGE NURSE BEFORE ENTERING signs, and I followed her down a room lined with beds containing desperately sick people hooked to a bewildering array of machines. We stopped at a bed with eight or nine tubes or wires hanging from various bottles and machines.

I stared down at Jerome's gray, lumpy body, listened to the machines beep and click and hum for a moment, then whispered, "What happened?"

"Apparently he was in the park down on the Common. Had a violent seizure and died. No pulse, no blood pressure. The ambulance brought him in, and Dr. Marancy worked on him and managed to bring him back. As soon as we get him stabilized a bit more, we're sending him down to Concord."

"For?"

She nodded at X-rays stuck on an unlit light table. "Mr. Prouty has two aneurysms. I assume they're going to try to repair them. If he doesn't die on the table, which is very likely, or doesn't stroke out, which is also very likely, or doesn't end up brain dead, which is . . ."

I held up my hand. "Enough . . . enough," I whispered. She nodded and arms folded again, walked away. I stayed by Jerome's bed for several more minutes, then made my way back through that terrible room and down to the lobby.

Cat was sprawled in the ample lap of the receptionist enjoying a gentle massage. The woman stood and handed Cat to me. "What a poor sweet little dear," she said. "Any time you need a cat sitter you just let me know." I thanked her, spent a couple of minutes with a phone book, then made my way through two sets of thick glass doors and out into a dark, misty day. Once Cat was wrapped in her quilt, I zipped up the trailer and pedaled through a cold drizzle to Blueberry Lane Condominiums.

Brenda Prouty lived in a three story slabwood condo that seemed to be all angles and odd-shaped windows. I locked the bike to her gunmetal Lexus, put Cat in the sling, and walked flagstone steps to a dark door with a narrow stained-glass window. I pounded on it, stepped back, and waited.

The door opened, and a handsome, fiftyish woman dressed in a full-length pale blue housedress and holding a large black mug against her middle looked at me.

Her eyes dropped to Cat, whose head and shoulders were sticking out of the sling, and a hint of a smile curled her thin lips. "I don't think I'm in the market for a handicapped feline. Why don't you try one unit over; the Matsons have a goddamn zoo over there."

I gave a small smile and bobbed my head. "Cat is not available to anyone for any price. My name is Harry Neal, and I've just come from the intensive care unit of the hospital, where your son is hovering near death. I'm interested in the hit and run and would like to ask you a few questions."

Her golden hair was done in an elegant style that wrapped it around her head, displaying her thin neck. She touched that neck with two fingers. "Interested? You are *interested* in the hit and run?"

"Perhaps a poor choice of words Mrs. Prouty."

"Perhaps indeed. Would you care for some champagne, Mr. Neal?"

"That would be nice."

"Come in, then, but keep the feline confined, I don't want it dropping turds on my floors," and she turned and walked into the house. I followed her along a short hall and down into a sunken living room with pale leather furniture, pastel walls, and a highly polished hardwood floor. She motioned, and I obediently sat down in an easy chair with a leather hide as pale and soft as my ex-wife's skin. As I kneaded Cat's neck and looked around, she produced another black mug from under a black free-form coffee table, filled it from an iced magnum of champagne that

sat on top of the table, and handed it to me. I smiled, drank, and smiled again. Lancers was going to be tough going after this.

She sat in the corner of a long couch, crossed her legs, and stared at me a moment. "I've seen you in town pedaling a bicycle with a little trailer attached to it. I assume the trailer is for your cat." I smiled and opened my mouth to speak, but she held up a hand. "And I've also seen you lounging in the park, sometimes talking with the other people who seem to spend a great deal of time there and sometimes just sitting against a tree, you and your cat and your bottle."

She took a sip of her champagne and carefully set it down. "I understand you used to be a history professor at the college but quit, divorced your wife, and now live the simple life. Now, I'm not sure why you choose to bring me news of my son or why you're—interested in the hit and run, but if the former is to chastise me for what you perceive to be despicable behavior with regard to Jerome, I assure you that I could give a rat's ass about your opinions. My feelings about my son are private and none of your god-damn business, and I don't want you to make an issue of it. I spent over twenty years of my life and a good deal of money trying to turn Jerome into something. I failed and was learning to accept him for what he was and liking him for what he was when the hit and run occurred. Now . . . now he is a rather retarded stranger."

I lowered my eyes and made a thing out of sipping champagne. To

my left, against the wall, was a small trophy case. Inside were several softballs covered with autographs, four tarnished trophies, and some faded photographs.

"You're quite right, Mrs. Prouty," I said, "your relationship with Jerome is none of my business. As I stated, it's the hit and run I'm interested in. The police have put the investigation in a drawer, and Jerome asked me to look into it for him. He said he wanted to know who killed him and why. I ignored him then, but now it seems a reasonable request."

"I see. Like most people, you avoided and ignored Jerome and then refused what could be viewed as his dying request." She stared at me. "Then you gaze upon his form in an intensive care unit, suddenly gain a conscience, and mount your white horse. And of course the first place you pedal your steed to is the poor lad's dastardly mother."

Jesus. I sat up straighter. "Mrs. Prouty, all I want to know is, was something going on the night Jerome was hit? Anything unusual, anything out of the ordinary? Was Jerome bothered by something? Was he going to meet someone?"

She refilled her black mug from the bottle and carefully set it down. "Are all history professors, excuse me, *ex-history* professors, as redundant as you are, Mr. Neal? Or do you just assume I'm stupid? Don't bother to answer, that was a rhetorical question. To answer *your* question, Mr. Neal, prior to the hit and run Jerome took a walk every night. He always took a walk before retiring. Nothing was bothering

him, nor was anyone out to get him. It was a normal evening, Mr. Neal, my son was simply out for a god-damn walk." She stood. "Before you leave, tell me, do you really think you can determine why someone tried to kill Jerome?"

"I don't know, Mrs. Prouty, but I certainly intend to try." I nodded at the trophy case. "Did he play baseball?"

"I did. Softball. Long ago. Our team won the championship numerous times. I could pitch a softball faster than anyone else in the league. When Jerome was younger, I tried to get him interested in baseball, but I..." She stopped talking, looked away for a moment. "Mr. Neal. My suggestion would be for you to go back to the park and drink your wine. I invited you in because I was curious and thought I detected a glimmer of intelligence in your eyes." She shrugged and spread her arms. "But alas, you're nowhere near as interesting as you looked standing at my door with your handicapped cat, and you're certainly not intelligent enough to ferret out the slime who killed my son."

Betty's notes stated that before the hit and run Jerome worked at Webster Canoe. I pedaled to the south end of Main Street and turned onto highway 3A. About two miles out I came upon a farmhouse sitting in the middle of a weed-choked yard that looked like it hadn't been mowed since the great flood of '38. WEBSTER CANOE was handpainted on the battered mailbox. The two story farmhouse was

square and, except for a decaying wraparound porch, as plain and unadorned as my grandmother's face. I turned off the road and pedaled down a rutted drive with a row of high weeds growing along the middle.

Behind the house was a small barn with a rack of canoes near the big door. I leaned the bike against a six foot maple growing out of the beaten dirt path leading to the back door of the house. As I was taking Cat out of the trailer and putting her into the sling, a woman opened the door and looked at me. She was dressed in denim shorts and a black T-shirt with WEBSTER CANOE printed on it in white letters. Her wet brown hair was piled high on top of her head. She nodded at Cat and said, "For God's sake don't put that cat on the ground. I have two German shepherds, a Doberman, and a shih-tzu."

I smiled. "Cat could probably take care of the shepherds and the Doberman, but I'm worried about that shih-tzu." As I spoke, a small hairy dog with a red barrette holding its hair out of its eyes bounded out of the house and began yapping furiously. The two German shepherds appeared from the back corner of the house and walked slowly toward me. I heard a snuffling, turned my head, and saw the Doberman, all black muscle and teeth, standing about five feet behind me. Cat thrust herself halfway out of the sling, waved her good paw in the air, and gave forth a squeaky hiss.

The woman laughed and clapped her hands twice, and the animals

turned and went back the way they had come. She walked up to me, pulled Cat out of the sling, and held her against her ample breast. "Goodness, what a brave little thing you are. All beat to hell and you're willing to have a go. My, my." She looked at me with sparkling blue eyes. "If you're looking for Donny, he's gone to Manchester for more epoxy. Our next batch of boats won't be ready until the first week of next month and they're sold, but I can put you on an order sheet for the batch after that."

"I'm not here to buy a canoe. I understand that Jerome Prouty used to work here, and I wanted to talk to your husband about him."

She petted a blissful Cat. "I see. Well, first of all I'm the Webster of Webster Canoes. Me, Diane Webster, there's no husband. Donny is my employee. Why are you inquiring about Jerome?"

"Yesterday he asked me to help him. I didn't want to be bothered. Today he's in the ICU and he's near death, and although it's too late, I thought I'd do what he asked, which is look into the hit and run."

The smile dropped from her face. She hugged Cat, kissed her between the eyes, and handed her back to me. "God. Not a whole hell of a lot went right for that guy."

"Can you think of any reason someone would want to kill him? Was he in some sort of trouble?"

"No. In fact he was pretty happy. I hired him because I felt sorry for him. I mean, he was your basic dumb-ass galoot, and I thought I'd have to make up work for him to do. But in a week he was laying fiber-

glass in the molds like he'd been doing it all his life. Really very good. After the hit and run his mother drove him out a few times and he tried, but, well, there was just too much damage. I told him he was welcome to come out anytime, but I haven't seen him for six or seven months now." Tears flowed down her cheeks. "And now the guy is as good as dead. Damn!"

"So as far as you know, everything was fine with him? Nobody angry or out to get him or anything like that?"

"No. He was teased a lot when he was younger and his childhood was generally hell on earth, but when he became an adult, people eased up on the verbal abuse and he wasn't beat up any more. I mean, he was lonely and his life wasn't pleasant, but as far as I could tell, everything was normal." She wiped the tears away and patted Cat. "Well, listen, I want to get dressed and get to the hospital, maybe hold his hand for a while."

"I realize I'm belaboring the point but are you sure that nothing was bothering him? Or that someone wasn't bothering him? It seems to me that there must be a reason for someone to try to kill him like that."

"I agree, but I'm quite sure. It was obvious that working out here was good for him, probably some of the best days of his life. I'm pretty sure everything was okay." She gave me a quick smile, turned, and walked into the house.

Gretchen's was crowded, but I managed to snag the last booth. Cat protested and carried on, mak-



ing it obvious that the counter was where the action was. But I held firm, and after she meowed and batted my hand a few times, she settled in by the napkin holder. A few minutes later Gretchen came over, put a pitcher of wine, a frosted mug, and a bowl of mixed nuts on my side of the booth, and slid in to the opposite seat. She pulled a cigarette out of her pocket, lit it with her Bic flamethrower, and blew smoke at the ceiling. Then she dropped a small cube of roast pork in the middle of the table. We both watched as Cat stalked it, then grabbed it, shook it a few times, and hauled it back to the napkin holder.

"You look like you're gonna get hauled to the gas chamber in about twenty minutes." Gretchen gave me a weary smile.

I gave her a weary smile of my own. "You said you talked with Jerome Prouty whenever he came in. By any chance was he in the day of the hit and run?"

She picked up the pitcher, topped off my wine, then downed half of it and coughed. "Matter of fact he was. He had the day off from that job of his out at that canoe place. Had a fried ham sandwich as always, and we sat right here in this booth and chatted on about nothing."

"He seem okay? Anything bothering him? Or anyone?"

"Nope. Fact is, he was about as happy as I'd ever seen him. He liked that job."

"So everything was all right?"

With the cigarette hanging out of her mouth, she stood, looked down

at me, and nodded, raining ashes in my wine. "Yep. As far as he was concerned, life was pretty good. Sure would like to see the bastard that did him like that nailed to a board and used for crow bait."

Cat wrapped herself around the napkin holder and dozed off. I slumped in the booth, gazed into infinity, sipped wine, and munched mixed nuts. When the pitcher was empty, I put a limp Cat in the trailer, pushed the bike out the door and headed home.

**M**ost of us are creatures of habit, and Betty is no exception. If it's eight in the morning and no nefarious acts are being committed, she'll be sitting on a stool in Gretchen's having coffee. I put Cat on the counter, sat on the broken stool next to her, and said, "Have you and Gretchen kissed and made up yet?"

She gave me a side-eyed look. "When she was spilling coffee on my hand, she told me they were in bad need of cops in Moscow. Said I'd fit in perfectly over there. Said I was probably Stalin's sister anyway, so why don't I just cart my fat ass over there and leave decent folks alone."

"And you said?"

"And I said I'd like a toasted cinnamon raisin bagel, hold the butter."

"Maybe you'd better cease and desist with the tickets. A couple more and you're going to have to eat at Manny's."

She smiled, put a finger on Cat's nose, and said, "Actually, my meter

maid days are over. The town hired a geezer to walk around with the ticket book. I've been a full beat cop for several weeks now, just put a few tickets on windshields to keep the locals in line until I get the geezer trained."

Gretchen, her seamed face frozen in a stern mask, set a cup of coffee in front of me, dropped a piece of cooked beef in front of Cat, dropped a perfectly toasted raisin bagel in front of Betty, and stalked back to the griddle. To avoid drinking coffee laced with cat drool, I dumped cream in the cup and sipped. Then I looked at Betty and murmured, "Jerome?"

"They took him down to Concord last night. Haven't heard anything, but the ICU nurse I talked to yesterday said they'll haul him into the OR as soon as they think he has a snowball's chance in hell."

"I made a few inquiries. As far as anyone close to Jerome knew, everything was fine with him. No problems, human or otherwise."

Cat lifted her head from Betty's cup, licked her nose, and with her tail straight up limped down the counter toward a huge man with several full plates in front of him. Betty drank some coffee. "It's hard to establish something like that. You can talk to twenty people, and they all say the same thing, Satan was a really nice guy. The twenty-first person, the one you didn't talk to, he's the one with the straight scoop."

"Maybe, but was anything else going on that night? Any ne'er-dowells prowling about that he might have run into?"

"We didn't find much. We talked to some people who were out and about, but outside of the hit and run it was a very quiet night. It was foggy and raining; even the Garden Club was inactive."

Cat, a sausage patty hanging out of her mouth, her good paws slipping on the Formica, came limping as fast as she could along the counter. The fat man, moving with the agility of a gymnast, rose from his stool and nabbed her. He gently pried the sausage from Cat's mouth and said, "Steal my sausage again and you're off to Wong Lu's Take-out." Then he laughed and lumbered back to his stool.

Betty stood, carefully put her blue cap on, and looked down at me. "The hospital is going to call me at two." She touched my shoulder and pulled Cat's ear. After another coffee I put Cat in her sling, asked a grimly silent Gretchen to watch my bike, and left.

The college library is a mix of old and new. Several millions of taxpayers' dollars were spent adding a swooping, curving two story wing of brick and glass to the old, stately, and I think dignified four story original. What the original lacked in swoops and curves, it more than made up for in Victorian splendor. With Cat hidden under my somewhat tattered windbreaker, I marched across the new brick walk and up a set of curving stairs. I edged to a far corner and peered into the main room of the new section.

In order to get to the old, one has to traverse the new. And much of

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the way through the new to the old is through the reference section, headed by one Gloria Somerville. When I was still a teacher at the college, Gloria and I often talked over coffee, and after my divorce we dated a few times. But my new lifestyle clashed with her concept of what a man should be, and our conversations and dating ceased.

And Gloria does not understand cats.

The front desk and counters were manned by students, and they were busy. Casually holding my jacket closed, I walked past the front desk and darted into the first aisle of the reference section. Surrounded by floor-to-ceiling shelves of thick, dusty books, I stopped, opened the jacket to give Cat some air, and plotted. Gloria was busy showing a student something on one of the computers. So, carrying out a series of astute maneuvers, I slipped from aisle to aisle, glancing every once in a while at Gloria's slim back. With a last glimpse I slipped through a thick wood door into the old part of the library, climbed creaking stairs to the top floor, and walked dim, musty aisles to my favorite corner at the rear of the old library.

I pulled Cat out of the sling and put her on one of the deep sills of the arched windows. She stretched, moved into direct sunlight, flopped down and looked at me with sleepy eyes. I gave her a pat and whispered, "Enjoy."

Even up here, in the gloomiest, dustiest section of the old library, computers were present. Screens glowing, they perched on a table,

awaiting human bidding. I sat, tapped keys, and eventually found the back issues of the *Gazette*.

I started with the day Jerome was hit. I read that issue and the next five issues. I went back to the day he was hit and did it again, reading every word, including the want ads. Then, to compensate for any cognitive lapses my aging brain might be causing me, I did it again.

I stood, looked at the one note I had made, and turned around.

And came face to face with Gloria Somerville. She stood framed in the sunlight with Cat dangling from one hand and giving me a look I haven't experienced in fifty ears. It was the same look my mother used to give me when I had committed some truly serious offense. I pasted a smarmy smile on my face, held out my arms, and said, "Gloria. May I say you look radiant. May I also say you must have eyes in the back of your head."

She sighed, held Cat out, and said, "One of the students informed me that a rather mangy looking older man was sneaking around and generally acting suspicious. I was about to call Security when the student happened to say the mangy older man had a cat hanging from his neck."

Cat meowed, licked her hand, and waved her bad paw at me. I took her, put her in the sling, and gave Gloria another smarmy smile. "So tell me, what's been the high point of your week?"

"There hasn't been a high point, and I'm in no mood for existential dropouts with a flip attitude. At

least twice a week you skulk through Reference with that poor scarred animal hanging from your neck and sneak up here. Did it ever occur to you that if you were to ask arrangements could be made for the beast while you studied?"

"Actually it did. But up here, in this ancient corner with its dark stacks, well, a cat sitting on a windowsill taking the sun, seems . . . appropriate."

With arms folded she gazed at me. Finally she said, "Harry, what the hell happened to you? You had a good thing here at the college, peers respected you, the students liked and respected you, and I know your wife loved you. Now you sit in the park and drink wine in the morning and converse with bums." She put her hand in her skirt pocket, took something out, and threw it at me. I raised my hand and snagged the object out of mid-air. It was a large brass key. I looked at the key, then looked at Gloria and raised my eyebrows. "That's to the old back entrance to this building," she said. "Don't let that furry wretch scratch the chairs; they're valuable antiques." And she turned and marched away.

I kissed Cat on her cold nose and whispered, "It seems we've been pardoned." I put her on the windowsill with the most sunlight and went hunting through the stacks. I found an ancient tome on local history by someone I'd never heard of and settled down in one of the antique chairs.

I was asleep in minutes.

After a pleasant couple of hours

in the old library I thought a mug of wine seemed in order, so with Cat dozing in the sling I headed toward the Common. Halfway across Main Street, a police cruiser glided up to me, and Betty rolled down the window and smiled. "You're strutting down the street like a man who just won Megabucks. Where's the preoccupied Harry Neal I've come to know and love?"

"Cat and I have been pardoned. We now have a key to the old library."

"I suspect the fair Ms. Somerville still carries a torch for you, Harry."

"Highly unlikely. She likes the respectable, tweed-coated type. I dropped from her radar when I ceased being a card-carrying member of the faculty."

"Well, maybe not a torch but certainly a lit match." She rubbed her face and shoved her hat to the back of her head. "The Concord Hospital called. Jerome went under the knife about two hours ago. After some hesitation the nurse I talked to said it's very long odds."

A flashing image of Jerome in the ICU flicked through my brain. With effort I pushed it aside. "I checked through back issues of the *Gazette*. The only item of note the night Jerome was hit was a wake for someone named Tarling."

"Yeah, Peter Tarling, he liked to swim in the river. Old Ruthie Augusta was walking across the bridge just as Peter drifted by one day, facedown. She screamed and generally raised hell, and some college kids dived in and dragged him out. Various people worked on him, but it was a no go."

"And thus the wake was the same night Jerome was hit."

"That's it. We checked it out and got nada."

"Tarling's wake was from seven to nine p.m. According to the copies of the report you gave me, Jerome was hit around ten."

"We know, I just told you we talked to those people and we eyeballed every vehicle they owned. Obviously we didn't come up with anything." She smiled and tweaked Cat's butt, which was hanging out of the sling. Cat jerked and yanked her butt back in the sling.

"What color was the car?"

"What car?"

"The car that nailed Jerome, what color was it?"

"We don't know."

"You don't? Getting hit as hard as he did, there must have been some paint imbedded in his skull or leg. There must have been paint smears on his clothing."

"When he was found, he was in the middle of the road. He must have crawled out there. Our first concern was to get him to the ER. It wasn't until later that we realized a vehicle had jumped the curb and driven across the grass strip to get him. The next day we went to collect his clothes from the hospital, but they'd thrown them in their incinerator. Chief Morin questioned the doctors and nurses who worked on him, but none remembered any paint smears. And there weren't any paint chips embedded in his brain or flesh." She pushed her cap to the back of her head, looked down the street, then put her cap back over her eyes and murmured,

"Apparently Jerome went over the hood and took out the windshield. The walk, the grass on the other side of the walk, and the dirt were full of little glass chips, but we didn't catch it because Jerome was lying in the middle of the road, semi-conscious, cut to hell and gone with his brains hanging out. We kinda stepped on our collective kranks on that one."

I thought about it, then asked, "What about his shoes, did they burn them, too?"

Betty shrugged. "I assume so. Sometimes relatives want the clothing if it's clean, but Jerome's clothes were torn to rags and soaked in mud and blood, so the shoes probably were, too. And if they burned his pants and other stuff, they'd burn the shoes." She stared out of the windshield for a moment. "I don't imagine I'll hear anything for awhile. If you want, call me this evening at home. I usually get there around seven."

I nodded, rapped the top of the car, and walked to Gretchen's. After getting Cat settled in the trailer, I pushed the bike up the alley and pedaled to the hospital.

The big receptionist snuggled Cat against her neck. "Oh, you're just the sweetest cuteums. What a little sweetie-weety you are." As she sang verbal nonsense into Cat's ear, she raised a huge arm, pointed, and told me where Maintenance was.

In Maintenance I consulted a large man with about twenty pounds of tools and keys hung on his belt and was passed to Housekeeping. Twenty minutes and two

consultations later I was in the basement talking to a tall man about my age dressed in an immaculate gray uniform. A white nametag said his name was William. I introduced myself and asked, "Are you the one who burns the ruined clothing that comes from the emergency room?"

He took a heavy looking pipe out of his mouth and pointed it at me. "Had to stop last year. Another god-damn health law. Now they call it contaminated waste. We have to seal it in red bags and box it. Then we pay eighty-five bucks a box to have it carted away."

"But you used to burn it?"

"Yes, I did. If the family didn't want it, it would come down in bags, and I'd dump it into the incinerator along with the rest of the burnables."

"Did that include the footwear?"

"Nope, usually didn't burn shoes, boots, or any other footwear. The artificial stuff they make the soles out of would choke half the town. One time after a big accident I threw in five of them high-priced tennis shoes. Got complaints from a mile away, and they left a coating in the chimney."

"So what do you do with the footwear?"

"It either goes to a landfill or the relatives take it home. Most likely they go to some landfill."

"But the relatives sometimes take them home? Are you sure?"

He stuck the pipe back in his mouth and looked at me. "When my son was killed in a rollover, about all that was left, about all that wasn't ripped up and smeared

with blood, were his Nike Air Maxes. I put them in a bag and took them home with me."

I chained the bike to the gun-metal Lexus, put Cat in the sling, and once again walked the flagstone steps and rapped on that imposing door. Brenda Prouty opened the door and stared at me. Today she was draped in a shiny green housedress and drinking her champagne out of a large ceramic beer stein. She blinked several times and said, "I'm aware, Mr. Neal, that my son is in the Concord hospital and that for all practical purposes he is dead. Now, why don't you and that scarred up little feline go to the park and take a nap or something."

"Mrs. Prouty, may I ask, do you have Jerome's shoes? The ones he was wearing the night of the hit and run."

She slowly lowed the stein and gave me a long look. "His shoes? Now you're interested in his shoes?"

"Yes. You see, the police didn't retrieve them, and the hospital didn't incinerate them. They're either in a landfill or you brought them home with you that night."

"Why, Mr. Neal? Why in the name of God would you be inquiring about Jerome's boots?"

"Because they might be able to tell me the color of the vehicle that struck him."

After a long moment she stepped off the threshold and stood very close to me. She smelled of jasmine and alcohol. "You know who did it?" she whispered.



"No, no, I don't, but I've made progress."

Her eyes turned inward. We stood on her steps, the wind pulling at our clothes. Finally she took a sudden, deep breath, cleared her throat, and whispered, "If you'll come with me," and she turned and walked into the house. I followed her along silent halls and through rooms smelling of new leather. We ended up in a two car garage crammed with boxes, trunks, tables, chairs, and plastic-enclosed garments hanging from the ceiling. She handed me the stein and began rummaging through the boxes. Fifteen or twenty minutes later she suddenly stood, and holding a plastic Shop 'N Save bag at arm's length, marched up to me. "I don't think I want this back."

I took the bag and handed her the stein. "Thank you, Mrs. Prouty."

She nodded and peered into the stein. "You drank my champagne, Mr. Neal."

After a small hiss fit Cat settled by the napkin holder and waited for Gretchen to come and grace her with fried meat. It took some time; supper was in progress, and the place was busy with gray-haired patrons fussing over a menu they knew by heart and bickering about side orders. But Gretchen finally put a pitcher of wine in front of me, dropped a gnarly looking hunk of meat between Cat's paws, and settled in the opposite seat. She lit a cigarette, blew a stream of blue smoke over my shoulder, coughed, and said, "I spend half the day roasting chickens and making my

grandmother's dressing and home-made cranberry sauce. I charge a pittance for it, and these yokels wanna know how come they don't get apple pie with it. Christ! I give them two pounds of food for two bucks a pound and they want a goddamn piece of pie."

She filled my mug and, holding it with both hands, brought it to her mouth and downed half of it. Then she refilled the mug and shoved it in front of me. "Any word about Jerome?"

I took a few quick gulps of wine and shook my head. "He's on the table. A nurse Betty talked to said it doesn't look good."

"Damn. The sad ones always seem to get the dirty end of the stick."

"I agree. The thing is, everything seems to have been right with him at the time. Nobody was mad at him, his mother said everything was okay with him, and he was happy at work. I checked several issues of the *Gazette* at the time of the hit and run. Nothing was going on. The only thing doing was Peter Tarling's wake."

Gretchen reached out and scratched the top of Cat's head. "Tarling was a nice man. Liked my kielbasa. Kind of a fat guy. Liked ta swim in the river, which is what got him. That river's tricky, doesn't look like there's much of a current but ya get in the center and a body can have a time getting back ta shore."

"He leave anybody behind?"

"A wife, Nancy. Seemed a nice enough sort, always had a smile for ya. But she also usually had some-

thing to complain about when they ate here, little things that most people don't pay any attention to. Hasn't been in since. I guess her new husband doesn't care for the ambience."

"Married again, did she?"

"Yep, and quick. Mebbe four months after she planted Peter. Married Marty Brunton."

"I don't think I know him. Is he one of our leading citizens?"

Gretchen grunted and blew smoke at the ceiling. "Depends on how ya look at it. I guess he's all right if you're not trying to buy a car."

I stared at her. "He sells cars?"

"He does, he does. Since you choose to pedal your bony ass around, you wouldn't know about such things. He owns Brunton Ford, out by the mall. Does pretty good, too, judging by the house he and Nancy have." She took another healthy gulp of my wine, then pulled Cat's ear and said, "Well, guess I'd better get back to it. You want anything else?"

"I'll try one of your two pound, four dollar meals. But leave the cranberry sauce in the refrigerator and bring me a piece of apple pie instead."

I waited until eight. Then I put Cat in the sling and walked through a light rain to the barn and with gritted teeth listened to Leo Golab prattle on about his glory years as a marine. After the obligatory ten minutes I smiled, patted his back, told him he was a hell of a man, and asked to borrow his cell phone.

"He's still alive," Betty said. "And they repaired the aneurysms, but he's not waking up. He's not brain dead, but the doc I talked to isn't optimistic. It seems Jerome just quietly slid into a coma and plans to stay there. Can't say I blame the poor bastard; life out here hasn't exactly been a sweet walk through the cornfield."

"What do you know of Marty Brunton of Brunton Ford?"

For a few moments I listened to static. Then Betty said, "Not much. Nancy Tarling married him not long after Peter died, four or five months, I think. Marty is your basic town businessman. He's probably gearing up for selectman. Chamber of Commerce, supports the Little League, always smiling, always shaking your hand. He and Nancy show up at the church suppers and they smile a lot, but it also sells Fords, so who's to know? I mean, the guy's a car salesman. Why are you asking about the Bruntons?"

"Did you check Brunton's car?"

"Of course. A hit and run? A guy who sells cars? A guy who was out that night? We aren't that stupid. He had a big Explorer at the time. Not a dent or drop of blood on it."

"How about the other cars? The ones at his business."

"The same. Chief Morin and Sergeant Lloyd spent a morning out there. No blood-spattered cars to be found. It was a long shot. Marty Brunton is your basic nice guy even if he is a commission salesman."

"So I take it Jerome will be staying at Concord Hospital for a while."

"That's a fair bet. You going to pedal down and see him?"

"Concord's a bit far. I still have Gretchen's old van; maybe I'll drive down sometime."

"Harry, I don't want to sound like a cop, but before you put that thing on the road, do get it inspected. The last time you were driving it I noticed it was three months past due."

"Even as we speak Ed Stafford is giving it a tuneup and general once-over. Gretchen wants to see more of Mulligan, and Mulligan is tired of curling up in Cat's trailer."

"Can't blame her for that. Good-night, Harry."

After rousing games of Wrestle the Hand and Kill the Sock, Cat settled down for a doze, and I put the Shop 'N Save bag on the settee table and opened it.

Jerome had been wearing tan Timberline boots when he was hit. Only one was in the bag. It sat on the table, a few pounds of dried leather, torn and stiff and crusted with old blood. Half the tongue was ripped off and stuck to the toe and maybe five inches of leather lace was hanging from the bottom eyelets. I stared at the boot for several minutes, then poured myself a mug of Lancers, put on my glasses, and picked up the boot.

I pedaled up a long, curving driveway to a large two story house with a front porch supported by thick wood pillars. Nancy and Marty Brunton lived in about three hundred thousand dollars' worth of red brick and stained wood. I pushed the bike onto the

porch, leaned it against a pillar, and put a sleepy Cat in the sling. Ignoring the doorbell and the brass door knocker, I gave the door several raps with my knuckles, put a hand on Cat's head, and stepped back.

With a low rumble the door slid into the wall, revealing a woman framed in the open doorway. She was middle-aged and pretty but starting to thicken and obviously working hard to keep from thickening further. Her blonde hair was cut short in a style one sees on magazine covers, and her dull yellow blouse and matching shorts looked expensive.

I threw out my best smile. "Hello, my name is Harry Neal. I assume you're Nancy Brunton?"

She gave the slightest of nods. "Yes, I am. And I've already hired someone to do the yard work. I suggest you go to the unemployment office. They'll show you what jobs are available."

"I'm not seeking employment, Mrs. Brunton. I'd like to ask you a few questions about the night of your first husband's wake if I may."

"My—my first husband's wake?"

"Yes."

"I don't understand. What on earth are you getting at?"

"On that night a man by the name of Jerome Prouty was the victim of a hit and run, and the police have been unable to locate the individual who did it. I've done some research; the only thing of note that transpired that night was your first husband's wake, and I was wondering if there might be a connection. I assume that a significant number

of people attended the wake, and perhaps one of them did the hit and run. Perhaps one of them tried to kill Jerome Prouty."

We stared at each other. I was conscious of several blue jays squawking in the trees behind me. Cat squirmed halfway out of the sling in an attempt to see the source of the noise.

Nancy Brunton cleared her throat and blinked several times. "Two things, Mr. Neal. One: it is extremely unlikely that any of Peter's or my friends would do something like that, and I find it offensive that a stranger would come to my door and suggest such a thing. And two: I have to leave, I'm already late for an appointment."

I nodded, threw out my smile again, and said, "Well, thank you for your time, Mrs. Brunton. I'm sure you're right, but I intend to keep digging into it. Would you like me to keep you informed?"

"As I said . . . Mr. Neal. It is crazy, simply crazy, to think that one of Peter's or my friends would do such a thing. I'm positive you're wasting your time."

With the smile burned onto my face I looked at her and in a low tone said, "How about your husband, Mrs. Brunton? Would he like to be informed of my progress?"

With a low rumble the big door slid shut, and I heard a heavy lock slide into place. I turned and looked up into the trees, but the blue jays seemed to have taken flight also.

Brunton Ford was a large white building surrounded by a wide variety of cars and trucks. Flashing

signs proclaimed that I could buy or lease a new Ford for only two hundred forty-nine dollars a month. I chained my bike to the front strut of a black Lincoln with a forty-one thousand seven hundred ninety-nine dollar price sticker on its window. As I was putting Cat in the sling, a portly man in a dark suit with a large white nametag on the coat came out of the showroom and hurried toward me. His smile a thing of grandeur, his hand outstretched like a battering ram, he marched up and said, "Good morning, friend, I'm Tommy Dodge. And friend, I've heard all the jokes. Which one of these beautiful cars can I put you in?"

I pulled my hand out of his iron grip. "None. I'm just here to try to match up a paint sample."

Tommy's eyes dimmed a bit, but his smile held. "That'd be parts. They have a big rack with a bunch of little bottles to the left of the counter. And friend, whenever you and that sorry looking hunk of fur get tired of pedaling, come see me, I'll do good by you."

I walked into the parts department, past a long counter manned by smiling men in white shirts, and stood before a rack filled with dozens of little bottles of paint. The bottles were about the size and shape of laundry markers, and the caps were the same color as the paint inside the bottle. I reached into the inside pocket of my windbreaker and pulled out a Christmas card CeeCee Dorfmann had sent me. Glued to the plain white back of the card were two green bits of paint about the size of a dime

that I'd teased out of the tortured leather that had once been Jerome's boot.

The rack contained over a dozen bottles of various shades of green. Holding the sample in my left hand, I plucked the little bottles out of the rack and one by one put the cap next to the sample. On the seventh comparison I should have yelled bingo. Clutching the bottle in my sweaty hand, I went to the counter and waited until one of the white-shirted men stood in front of me and raised his eyebrows. I showed him the bottle. "What model cars use this color?"

He took the bottle, opened a large looseleaf book, and turned pages. He studied one page for several moments, then raised his head. "Only Lincoln Town Cars and Lincoln Continentals come in Metallic Charcoal Green."

I thanked him, bought the little bottle of Metallic Charcoal Green, and walked outside to my bike. As I was unlocking the bike, I became aware of a man standing behind me. I put Cat in the trailer, straightened, and looked at him. He was a rather short middle-aged man with thinning hair and a fleshy, hangdog face. He stood, hands in his pockets, looking sad and worried, for all the world like a circus clown without the makeup. His nametag read MARTY BRUNTON. I gave him the same smile I'd given his wife. "I'm not in the market for a new car just now. I only came to compare paint."

He studied me for several moments, then took a deep breath and said, "Nancy called me. You can't possibly believe that someone at

Peter's wake was responsible for that man getting run over, can you?"

I shrugged. "It is a possibility. The weather was lousy, Tarling's wake was the only function going on that night, and Jerome was hit a short time after the wake ended. It's certainly something to look into."

"I thought the police had given up, that they had no leads or suspects and had stopped looking."

I stood, my hand in my pocket rolling the little bottle around in my palm, and looked at him. Finally I smiled thinly. "You're right, the police have stopped looking. But I haven't, and I don't intend to." Then I nodded, got on the bike, and pedaled away.

Drinking wine out of a paper or Styrofoam cup alters its flavor. Thus I keep a ceramic mug in Cat's trailer for those occasions when crystal or other suitable vessels are not available, such as when I drink in the town park. My back against my favorite maple, I finished the Lancers, put the mug aside, and closed my eyes. Secured to my wrist was one of those leashes on a spring-loaded reel, giving Cat ample latitude for her adventures. As usual she tried to squirm out of her spiffy red harness, failed, and was now stalking the fluttering bugs that frolicked just above the grass.

I was in that pleasant hypnagogic state, fast sinking into sleep, when someone starting kicking the sole of my right foot. I gurgled and snorted but the kicks persisted, so I forced myself out of the depths and opened my eyes.

Wearing a tailored gray pantsuit, pinstriped shirt, and very narrow gray tie, Brenda Prouty stood over me, her foot cocked back for another go at my sole. "Neal, my son is comatose in a hospital, his killer is still unfound, and you're sleeping under a goddamned tree." In a quick, flowing movement she bent, snatched the bag by my side, and peeked inside. "Lancers. I should have guessed. Next week I have no doubt you will have progressed to Mogen David 20/20 or Thunderbird."

I straightened, yawned, and followed the leash with my eyes. Cat was under the trailer on her back with all four paws in the air. I looked up at Brenda Prouty and said, "To carry Justice's torch often requires stealth and patience, patience being the key word in that statement."

"Do not mouth insipid homilies in my presence, Mr. Neal, it's insulting to both our intelligences. I thought you had a inkling of who tried to kill Jerome. Why aren't you pursuing it?"

"I do, and I am, in my own fashion. And I consider your concerns and desires in the matter moot." I slumped down a bit to make my point, muttered, "Good afternoon," and closed my eyes.

It was silent for a moment. Then she kicked my sole again. "In the first place, Mr. Neal, it's still morning. In the second place, I want to—I *demand* to know just what it is you have found out that the police didn't. And I demand to know what you are doing with the information. And be assured, Mr. Neal, that I

don't give a rat's ass about your opinions concerning my concerns and desires in this matter."

Jesus. I gave her my basic smarmy smile and gestured with my hand. "Do sit down, Mrs. Prouty. We'll share a mug of Lancers, and I'll tell you what I've learned. Perhaps you can come up with a plan."

She looked at me, looked left, looked right, sighed, and slowly settled beside me. I pulled the Lancers out of the bag, filled the mug, made taking a sip of it somewhat of a show, then handed her the mug. She drank, made a face, then drank again and handed back the mug. "Now will you kindly tell me what you've been up to, Mr. Neal?"

**B**renda Prouty stared at the two paint chips. I hadn't told her about the Bruntons. When she handed them back to me, she said, "We have two choices. One, we can go to the police with the paint samples. Armed with new evidence, they are obligated to pursue Jerome's hit and run further. Or we can continue on with the investigation ourselves. I think the latter, as the police seem to have trouble finding the other side of the goddamn street."

I finished the wine and put the mug in the bag. "We? I don't think you and I would make a very effective or compatible team, Mrs. Prouty."

"We don't have to be compatible. We don't even have to be very effective. What we have to be is aggressive and tenacious. We have to find out who owned a green car."



I spent a few moments watching the traffic go by. Finally I said, "Actually, Mrs. Prouty, all we have to do is find a Metallic Charcoal Green Lincoln Town Car or Continental."

She stared at me for a moment, then in a small voice said, "You devious bastard, you know. You know who tried to kill Jerome."

"As I stated before, I've made progress."

"And you won't tell me? Why? Do you doubt my stability?"

I pasted a calm smile on my face. "I think you're about three bricks shy of a load, Mrs. Prouty."

After a moment she smiled back. "Very well. Just for the record, I'm quite sane and don't care how dysfunctional you think I might be. But I'll humor you if it will lead to Jerome's killer. What do you suggest we do? And don't tell me to go home and wait, Mr. Neal. That is not an option."

"As I said, we have to locate the car, the green Lincoln. Now, you're fairly sophisticated, so I assume you know your way around town offices. While I stay here and guard the park, would you go to the new courthouse and find out who owns the auto salvage establishments and junkyards in the area."

Cat came limping up, licked my hand, pulled herself onto Brenda's lap, put her bad paw on Brenda's chin, and went "Errrrr?"

Brenda looked down at Cat and gave her a tentative pat on the head. Cat licked her hand, meowed, and lay down in her lap. Brenda let out an exasperated sigh, gingerly put Cat on the grass, and stood. She wiped grass off her rump

and said, "You aren't just sending me on some sort of frivolous errand, are you? This is pertinent?"

I poured myself half a mug of Lancers. "Yes. Yes, I think it is."

Brenda Prouty kicked my foot, and as I yawned and stretched, settled beside me. Cat immediately climbed on her lap. Brenda gave Cat a look, muttered something, and pulled out a small notebook.

"There are two junkyards and two auto salvage yards within a twenty mile radius of town. The junkyards are owned by Willy Phillips and Earl Homa, and the auto salvage yards are owned by Herb Cummings and Jim Flint. The Cummings Auto Yard is co-owned by Pulsifer Chevrolet, and the Flint Auto Yard is co-owned by Brunton Ford."

I looked at my watch. "All right," I said. "I'll be at your house tomorrow morning around ten. Be dressed for a search in what is sure to be grimy conditions."

"Do not be obtuse with me. I deserve to know what you intend to do. I deserve to be a part of this."

"We're going to search for a green Lincoln, Mrs. Prouty. A green Lincoln with a dented front end and a smashed windshield."

"There's still plenty of daylight left. Why don't we start now?"

I held out my hand and watched two fat drops of rain splash on my palm. I pointed to the black clouds above us. "It's been two years. Waiting one more day will be all right."

The rain began to fall in earnest. She set Cat on the grass, stood, took off her suitcoat, and held it over

her head. "Eight. Be at my place at eight."

I watched her trot out of the park, then got my rainsuit out of Cat's trailer and pulled it on. By the time Cat was bundled up and we were headed out of town, the wind-driven rain was coming down in hissing sheets that sent rivulets of cold water down my chest and back. And by the time I unlocked the boat and dropped into the cabin, I was soaked.

I exchanged my wet clothes for a dry sweatsuit and knelt in front of the stove to build a fire to take the chill out of the cabin. Cat, a bit miffed at my twisted priorities, reminded me of same by batting her supper dish across the floor. I stotically ignored her, even when the dish bounced off my leg and flipped upside down. As I carefully added a few twigs to the smoldering heap in the stove, Cat went to the cabinet under the cutting board, hooked her good paw under the door, pulled it open, and let it go. When the door banged shut for maybe the tenth time, I picked up her dish and fetched the bag of little brown pellets. I could build a fire later, after my supper.

**B**renda Prouty's Lexus was a step or two up from Gretchen's old VW camper. And it was a quantum leap up from the bike. Cat dozed in the sling while I lounged in the leather bucket seat and sipped at a large cup of coffee. On the way out of town we passed Brunton Ford, and I saw Marty Brunton leaning on the door of his Explorer talking

to the portly salesman who had heard all the jokes. They glanced our way as we passed, and I considered waving but refrained.

A few miles later we turned onto a dirt road and drove through the gateless opening of a high wooden fence that ran a hundred yards on both sides of the opening. We glided up to a wood shack braced on one side by two by fours. Dense gray smoke poured from a chimney made of a large exhaust pipe; the windows were old car windows. As we drove up, a large, thick man dressed in greasy overalls stepped out of the plywood door and held up a hand. We stopped, and Brenda rolled down her window. "Good morning. Does it cost anything to look around?"

He stared at us. Brenda's idea of dressing for grimy outings was a black pinstriped pantsuit with a blue shirt, thin black tie, and black beret. Her only concession to style was a pair of black and gray ankle-length boots that nicely matched the suit.

The man cleared his throat. "Tell me what you're looking for. I can most likely save you some time."

She smiled and told the man our cover story. "We're not sure what we're looking for, I'm a sculptress, and I'm searching for unique pieces of metal and plastic to create abstract forms with. Mr. Neal here is going to help me load and unload them."

"You're going to do a world of hurt to the interior of that Lexus if you load it up with old hunks of metal and plastic. Some of the stuff is bound to be greasy."

"I'm not concerned, Mr.—"

"Flint, Jim Flint. And if you're not concerned, neither am I. Have at it. When you're through, stop back here, and I'll add it up."

Jim Flint's Auto Salvage Yard was huge. Acres of crumpled, corroding vehicles were arrayed in even rows. Weeds, high grass, and stunted trees grew in and around hundreds of rusting chunks of metal that had once been someone's expensive pride and joy. Brenda guided the Lexus down a narrow lane, then turned onto another dirt-packed trail and stopped. I could see people walking around, or grouped around some dead vehicle looking intently under the hood or peering through shattered windows.

Brenda waved a hand in the air. "This place is huge. It'll take days to search it."

"If I were going to hide a vehicle here, I would park it far from the road and Flint's shack. I'd put it in a place where people looking for parts wouldn't be likely to come across it." I pointed at some men gathered around a wrecked pickup truck. "People seem to be looking for stuff near the middle and toward the front. Why don't we go to the back and start from there?"

There were no roads at the far end of Flint's yard, just tire-beaten paths through the high grass. We drove along rows of wrecked, stripped cars and trucks that were little more than rust-eaten shadows of their former selves. Cat slid out of the sling, crawled onto Brenda's lap, got up on her hind legs, put her front paws on the steering

wheel, and looked out the windshield. Brenda gently touched the back of Cat's head but didn't push her off her lap. A minute or two later she said, "It would be nice if you could contain your animal."

"She needs the practice. Her driving test is next week, and she's still a little shaky on the finer points of salvage yard maneuvering."

"I don't find you humorous, Mr. Neal. In fact, I . . ."

Not desiring another insulting tirade, I interrupted by putting my arm across her face and pointing. "That area seems to be the most overgrown and neglected and therefore the most likely. Why don't we park the car and search it on foot?"

With Cat's able assistance, Brenda drove through the high grass to a line of sick looking maples. She picked up Cat, dropped her in my lap, and said, "It's still a lot of territory to cover."

"I suggest we split up. You start here and work the rows toward the center. I'll go to the other side and do the same." I pointed at an old crane, its skeleton framework pointed at the sky. "We'll meet by that crane in two hours."

"This is becoming something of an expedition. I should've brought something to drink."

I put Cat in the sling, got out of the car, and stuck my head back in. "I'll buy you a bottle of Lancers when we get back to town."

Judging by the look she gave me, Brenda Prouty really didn't find me humorous.

Pushing through wet, knee-high

grass, I cut across a row of ancient tractors and walked to a Chevy truck with a split windshield. I went around to the back and peered into the enclosed rear. The roof and one wall were collapsed inward, and weeds and small trees pushed through the rotted floor. And it was empty. No green Lincoln. I wiped my face, brushed wet grass and mud off my pants, and checked my watch. The two hours were nearly gone. I climbed up on the truck and looked around but didn't see Brenda. A light rain began to fall, and I was beginning to wish we had both brought something to drink. Pushing through the damned grass, I skirted several large piles of scrap metal and trudged to another row of trucks.

Crumbled and broken, rusted to hell with trees and shrubs growing through their hoods and windows, the trucks lay in a sad, ragged line, slowly being destroyed by the malignant rust. I walked along the back of them peering into rotting beds, finding more scrap metal and vegetation. I heard a noise to my left, climbed onto the exposed frame of a sixties-era oil truck, and looked around, but I didn't see anyone. I hollered, "Brenda!" thought I heard a faint reply and hollered her name again, but didn't hear any answer.

I jumped off the oil truck, splashing mud on my pants, and headed toward the crane. I trudged along, my head bent against the rain, skirting pools of stagnant water and the pieces of rusting metal that lay everywhere.

Then I stopped. I wiped rainwa-

ter off my face and looked back the way I had come. Cat, squirming and meowing, reached out and snagged my sleeve with her good paw and went "Errrr?" I put a hand on her back, whispered, "Not yet, not just yet," and headed back.

Five large piles of scrap metal so close together they were almost one formed a long, high line. The piles contained everything from twisted auto frames to tire rims, bumpers, car doors, fenders, and anything else that used to be a car, truck, or farm vehicle. The pieces were randomly placed, obviously dropped on the piles in no apparent order.

Except for the first pile on the right.

It seemed to comprise mainly car hoods and doors stacked nearly upright, making a large, lopsided rectangle with tire rims forming a rounded top. I spent a few moments calming an anxious Cat and studying the pile. Then I moved the sling and Cat so they hung down my back and began pulling the pile apart. The hoods and doors were stacked several deep, like folding chairs against a wall. I kept at it, pulling the pieces off the pile and often causing tire rims to come crashing down, making me jump out of the way or hold something in front of me as a shield. The noise, the jumping around, made Cat squirm and yeow and hiss, and I mentally promised her a prize at Gretchen's when I was through.

It didn't take long. I pulled several more rims off the top, then a few crumpled doors. With my hand I rubbed away two years of accumulated grime. The hood of the

Metallic Charcoal Green Lincoln Town Car was crumpled, with two deep tears running almost its entire length. I pulled off more scrap metal. The windshield was gone. On the passenger side, above the outside mirror, was a deep, rusted dent. I soon exposed the passenger side door and stood with one hand on the handle, remembering another hidden and neglected car I'd once found. Then I took a deep breath and gingerly pulled the handle. The door opened silently, revealing grimy bucket seats covered with hundreds of bits of windshield glass. I put my head inside. Lying on the passenger-side floor was a dried-up boot. Two bones stuck about eight inches out of the top.

"You should have left well enough alone, Neal. You should have stayed in the park, drinking your booze with the other bums." I stepped back and turned around. Dressed in new looking jeans and a blue raincoat, Marty Brunton stood by the third pile of scrap metal pointing an over and under shotgun at me. He stared at me with those sad, baggy eyes and that circus frown. "Guys like you, like you and that Prouty, you breathe precious air, take up valuable space, and in the end always—*always*—cause problems for other people."

On legs suddenly weak and trembling I moved to my right, getting one step closer to the small gap between the looming piles of scrap metal. "Jerome was simply taking a walk, Marty, and you deliberately ran him down. I'd say it was you who caused the problem."

"Wrong, Neal. That slob caused

the problem. He saw things he shouldn't have, and I had to do something about it." He took one hand off the shotgun and wiped the rain from his face. I took one more step toward the gap. "If he'd stayed home, there wouldn't have been a problem."

"What did he see, Marty? What did he do that made you want to commit murder?"

He pointed the shotgun at my middle. "Enough crap, Neal. You're not going to take another step, and you're not going to prolong your life with asinine questions. I'm going to do you, then I'm going to find that Prouty woman and do her. You two can cosy up in the Lincoln. It's nice and quiet and . . ."

Cat, who had been twisting and turning in the sling hanging down my back, jumped out and with a loud yowl hit the ground. Brunton instinctively pointed the shotgun at her. Cat hobbled between us, waved a paw at me, and yowled again. Then both Cat and Brunton looked at something behind me. Brunton's eyes widened, and he hunched and started to raise the shotgun. Something hummed past my head and smashed into his face. He staggered back and again tried to raise the gun. Another piece of metal whipped past me and struck him in the head with terrible force. His face running crimson, he gagged and sank to his knees.

I turned. Brenda Prouty, her pantsuit wet and caked with mud, her face a dead white, expressionless mask, whipped her arm in a full circle and, underhand, pitched another piece of metal at Brunton.

With a high, wet smack it struck him in the forehead and sent him tumbling backward into a pool of black, oily water. I raised an arm and shouted at Brenda, "Enough! He's through."

Ignoring me, she stooped, picked up a three foot piece of iron bar, and marched toward Brunton, who had managed to sit up. Head down, his face raining blood, he sat in the water, blubbering, moaning, uncomprehending. I stepped in front of him, stuck out both hands, and hollered, "Brenda, he's had it! We've got him. Put that thing down and call 911, then . . ."

Like a big league player, she whipped the piece of iron over her shoulder and swung. The bar sliced across my left cheek as I jumped back and tumbled over Brunton. I scrambled to my feet. Brenda, that same dead white look on her face, stood over Brunton and raised the iron bar over her head.

Cat pulled herself onto Brunton's lap, looked up at Brenda, and raised her good paw. Brenda, her beret gone, the rain pouring off her, the iron bar high above her head, glared down with bulging, mad eyes. Brunton, his blood-drenched head flopping and rolling, moaned and gurgled. Cat, her wet fur sticking out like little spikes, stayed on his lap and looked up at Brenda.

Brenda moaned, dropped the bar, and sank to the ground. Cat limped over to her, crawled onto her lap, and put a paw against her face. She gathered Cat in her arms and sobbed silently.

I took off my raincoat, shirt, and T-shirt, folded the T-shirt, pressed it

against Brunton's maimed face, and gently laid him down. He gurgled and blew bubbles of blood. I turned him onto his side, and he seemed to breathe easier. Then I went to Brenda, who was crying into Cat's neck, fished her cell phone out of her pocket, and punched 911.

**B**etty Worthen sipped her coffee, slowly put the mug on the counter, and without looking at me said, "They put three hundred and twelve stitches in his face. And several of the cuts they had to leave open because of the infection. He was conscious for maybe twenty minutes yesterday, then slipped back into unconsciousness. They took a CAT scan. There's quite a bit of damage to the frontal lobes, and when he regains consciousness, they think he's going to be a little gaga. For a woman who hasn't pitched a ball in thirty years, she did one hell of a lot of damage."

On hearing her name, Cat had raised her head and looked at Betty. Betty dipped her finger in her coffee and held it under Cat's nose. Cat took a couple of licks, then put her head against the napkin holder and closed her eyes. "We finished interrogating Nancy around nine last night. When she wasn't being hysterical, she babbled."

I downed my wine. Then in what had quickly become an automatic gesture, I ran my fingers along the scab that ran down my cheek. I refilled my mug and asked, "She babbled any logic to their actions?"

"The Bruntons and the Tarlings had been friends for a few years.



They'd have each other over for cards or a barbecue, your basic get-togethers. Then, because she weighed two hundred and forty pounds and wouldn't do anything about it, Marty divorced his wife. He stayed friends with the Tarlings, and one fine night he and Nancy looked into each other's eyes and fell in love. Very passionate, those two. According to Nancy, it was meant to be. Peter's drowning was a sign from Heaven, a gift from God. Anyway, the night of the wake, Marty made a show of offering to drive Nancy home. Only they couldn't wait until they got there. They parked on Oak Street and started doing what they liked to do best. When Marty was nibbling on a pertinent part of her anatomy, Nancy happen to look out the window and there was Jerome, looking back.

"They got the hell out of there. Marty dropped her off and went hunting. Obviously, he didn't have his Explorer; he was driving the green Town Car, a demo from his lot. Chief Morin dropped that ball. He should have checked the inventory sheets. Marty ate over forty grand when he buried that car. Anyway, he sees Jerome walking up Birch Street, jumps the curb and nails him, and heads back toward the street. But Jerome, instead of dying nicely, comes over the hood, smashes into the windshield, and ends up in the car. Marty stops, pushes Jerome back out the windshield, and drops him in the road. The car is pretty beat up, the windshield's missing, and Jerome's foot, still in its boot, is lying on the front passenger seat. Marty

gets the hell out of there, goes to the salvage yard, and spends a few frantic hours building a scrap heap around the car. Then he calls Nancy on his cell phone, and she comes and picks him up. They sweat bullets for a few months, then get married and more or less forget the whole thing."

"I wonder what they thought whenever they saw Jerome on the street."

Betty gave me a side-eyed look. "Jerome was a temporary problem in their lives. Once they realized he was retarded and had no memory of the hit and run, in fact had no memory of the entire month, they sort of forgot about him and got on with their lives. The big thing was getting away with nailing him, with getting sexual the same night Nancy was saying goodbye to Peter. To them Jerome was just basic stuff, a bum who didn't merit much consideration. I talked to the geezer who does yard work for them. He says they made it obvious that he himself was something less than human.

"It's a nice touch," she added, "that Marty's going to be a warble-head. Odds are, he's gonna spend the rest of his life at County."

"And Nancy?"

Betty grunted and smiled a meaningless smile. "There's a bit of plea-bargaining going on. If the D.A. doesn't have a hangover, Nancy will do three to five at Goffstown."

"Three to five? For murder?"

"Harry, first of all it isn't murder. Jerome is still alive. Second, her lawyer is saying she didn't know

what Marty was going to do, and her only crime is not reporting Marty to the police. It's not beyond possible she'll walk."

Jerome Prouty lay motionless in the bed. The machines, their tubes and wires leading into various parts of him, clicked and hummed. Brenda, dressed in a pale gray pantsuit, her eyes closed, sat by the bed holding his hand. Moments later she opened her eyes, looked up at me, and said, "Where's your feline?"

"She's guarding the van. How is he?"

"He's slipping." She stood up, glanced at my scabbed cheek, then ran her hands through her disheveled hair. She looked at me through dark-rimmed eyes and said, "I'm going to get a cup of coffee. Would you like anything?"

"No, I just want to spend a few minutes with him. Then I'm going to head back."

She stared at me. The seconds ticked by.

Finally she nodded slowly. "Perhaps you'd like to stop by the house for a glass of champagne sometime? You and your cat. I wouldn't mind if it wanted to explore the house."

I returned her slow nod. "Perhaps . . . sometime."

"Fine. I'll be back in a few minutes. You'll stay with Jerome?" And without waiting for a reply she walked out of the room. I sat in the chair by Jerome's bed and studied his gray, scarred face and listened to his labored breath. Then took his hand in both of mine, leaned close, and told him who killed him and why.

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# UNSOLVED

Robert Kesling

*Unsolved at present, that is, but can you work it out?*

*The answer will appear in the July-August issue.*

His secretary directed Tom Thompson's attention to the letter at the top of the stack of incoming mail. "I thought you might want to look at this first," she said. "It's—well, it's just different from most letters we receive."

"Who's it from?" asked the head of the Detroit division of the FBI.

"He doesn't sign his name. Just gives some clues as to who he is. But it concerns six very old murders."

"How old?"

"Long before we were born, sir," she laughed. "Back in the early thirties, I gather."

"A little late to be trying to track down a killer of that era," said Thompson. "He's probably dead now anyway."

"The writer evidently doesn't think so," she replied. "Anyhow, I think you'll find it quite interesting." With that, she left.

Tom Thompson sighed and picked up the letter. It was handwritten in pencil, and the spelling was atrocious. Still, he supposed it was worth reading, if not worth an actual investigation. After all, the crime of murder has no time limit. And his secretary had said it concerned *six* murders. He had been told that the Depression was a time of daring bank robberies and murders—like those attributed to John Dillinger, Bonnie and Clyde, and the rest.

He began reading:

"To the FBI deer sirs. It's bin waying on my mind for some time and since I aint got long for this world, I figger I owt to tell somebody about what reely happened back in them depreshun times betwixt 1931 and 1936. So far as I no, them murders was never solved. The one who actual pulled the trigger was Gus Gruber, the one we always called Gunner. I no for sure he killed at leest six men back then. 'Doan never leeve no witnesses,' Gus always said and he never did. Gus was our leeder and let us no it.

"Aside frum our leeder, there was six of us in the gang, all born betwixt 1911 and 1916. Yeah, we was old enuff to no rite from rong, but we needed the money. Or we thowt we did. Anyhow, Gus took a diferunt one of us along as driver of the gitaway car each yeer. He'd call out 'Yore turn, Andy!' or 'Yore turn this year Bart!' We stuck up a diferunt bank

(one was Drake Savings) in a diferunt state every yeer (one was in Virginia) . . .”

The FBI division chief read on, extracting from the rambling letter the following information:

(1) The gang member driving when Mr. Lewis was shot was one year older than the gang member whose last name was Roller and one year younger than Bart. They participated in bank holdups in 1931, 1935, and 1936.

(2) The driver in the South Carolina holdup was one year older than the gang member whose last name was Mason and one year younger than the driver when the Farmers' Bank was held up. The three men were Dan, Eddie, and Frank.

(3) The one participating in the 1931 robbery was one year older than the gang member whose last name was Norris and one year younger than the driver in the Utah holdup.

(4) Eddie participated in the holdup that took place one year after the one during which Mr. Jilson, the banker, was shot and one year before Mr. Parker drove the getaway car. Those holdups occurred in Tennessee, Utah, and Wisconsin.

(5) Mr. Olson took part in the holdup the year just after the one that took place in Utah and the year just before the one during which Mr. Inman was shot to death. The three drivers of the getaway cars were born in 1911, 1914, and 1916.

(6) Frank (who is not Mr. Olson) drove the year after the robbery of the Bankers' Trust bank (which was not in 1931) and the year before the holdup during which Mr. Lewis was shot (which did not take place in Texas). These three gang members had the last names of Norris, Olson, and Roller.

(7) Mr. Hanks was the victim the year after Mr. Queen was the driver and the year before the man born in 1911 drove. During those holdups the Altman Bank, the Citizens' Savings (which is not in Wisconsin), and the Empire Bank were stripped of all cash.

(8) The gang member doing the driving when Mr. Jilson was shot was one year younger than the one participating in the robbery of the Altman Bank, who was neither Dan nor the gang member present when Mr. King was gunned down in his bank.

(9) The one who helped rob the Citizens' Savings Bank was younger than Cal and older than Dan. One of them was present when Mr. Graves, the banker, was shot in his place of business.

The unsigned letter closed with this:

"You doan no who I am, of coarse, but I live rite here in Detroit. If you can figger out who I am, you can find me and I'll tell you where to find Gus Gruber the Gunner. Hes purty old now but hes made a pile of money and yule be surprised who he turns out to be. A clue as to who I am: I was the one who drove the gitaway car in 1934."

It was a challenge Tom Thompson couldn't resist. He quickly figured out who had written the letter and interviewed him in the retirement home where he resided. As the old man had indicated, the identity of the killer was indeed a surprise—a former city official! In the meantime he had changed his name, but there could be no doubt about his identity once the old fingerprints were checked.

*Which member of his old gang revealed the present identity of the callous killer and bank robber?*

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See page 138 for the solution to the May puzzle.

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FICTION

# The Megoolen

Gerald Standley



Illustration by Patrick Tinmes

Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine 6/01

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I am a careful man. I have been told that I am also a patient man. Patience in remaining with my uncle has more than once been interpreted as devotion. I might have married years ago and, like other men, given my attention to a family and affairs of my own instead of looking after my father's only sibling, seeking to make sure that the disease that took my father should be fended off as long as possible in my uncle's case. Others have perceived this way of living as self-sacrificial, but the truth is simply that I am a careful man.

Uncle Edmund was a childless widower. On his death I was not only sole heir, but the principal mourner. It is at the funeral that this account commences.

I had insisted that it be an open casket service although I knew that very few would care to view the body. I had assured the funeral director that cost was not a consideration (Uncle Edmund was very wealthy), and his services had included making sure that the sanctuary was in perfect order and that the service itself should go forward impeccably. About halfway through the clergyman's eulogy it came to my attention that a peculiar fuzziness was obscuring my view of the flowers beyond the casket. At first I conceived that it might be attributable to the rise of heated air, but as there was no heat source in that locality, my second conjecture was that something about the flowers was the cause. But no other flowers, I observed, were so affected. Soon my attention was wholly absorbed by this phenomenon.

Ahead lay much worse. For as I watched, there materialized before my eyes—I know of no other way to describe it—a tiny creature situated on top of the coffin above the feet of the corpse. My description of that tiny “creature” will prove much more complete than any I could have given at the time, for I beheld but one and that from a distance of some fifteen or twenty feet. I believe that all I then saw was no more than a shadowy little bulk in which I thought I discerned legs, arms, and head. As it became more distinct, my alarm grew. What tasteless trick was some fool employee of the mortician up to? Here in full ceremony! A crude and uncanny absurdity!

I tried from the corner of my eye to observe the persons behind me, for it was plain that the speaker was either not seeing it or else ignoring it with the most commendable fortitude. I listened for the sounds of whispering, or of people rising to leave, or other such indications that the diminutive participant at the casket's foot was noticed. But the silence was suspended only by the drone of the speaker's voice and an occasional quite ordinary cough from one or another of the respectful hearers. Could it be that no one else had seen it? This was the conclusion I finally reached: you can imagine with what relief. Later observations indicated that this happy conclusion was correct. Neither during the service, nor after it, nor at the burial did there appear the least evidence that what so mystified me had been seen by any other person.



Had this been the only occasion on which my senses were beguiled into believing the unbelievable, the entire matter could have rested there. The most ordinary care dictated that any mention of the aberration was entirely unnecessary. But when after the burial I returned home—to the same house where I have lived until recently, that my uncle and I occupied, that was now my property—the instant I entered the door I experienced what I have felt constantly since but had never known before: the disconcerting feeling that there was someone with me. Someone not at all friendly; indeed, someone opposing me and threatening my well-being. *Someone!* Strange that I should put it that way. Strange on two accounts. First, was it really a person? and second, it soon became clear that it was not one that was afflicting me, but alas—how many I cannot say!

Perched on the arm of my uncle's favorite chair, visible to me the moment I entered the parlor, was the "figure" again. No more than a palm in height, it could now be observed clearly. The legs were two, short black ones. The arms were two, long and dark. The configuration suggested a small, ill-formed monkey. It stood, or rather crouched, on the arm of the chair, apparently awaiting my entrance. At least it was turned toward me.

I stepped backward into the foyer with my eyes still on the creature, opened the drawer of the small table, seized therefrom a long letter opener. With this in hand I felt armed, for I conceived that to my opponent it could only appear as threatening as Goliath's spear must have seemed to the Israelites.

Even so, I advanced with caution. I had no way of knowing what this tiny enemy might do. Could he throw himself onto my person? Might he bite? Might the fangs that were the most conspicuous part of his black, hairy visage be poisonous? The closer I came to it (no move was made to escape me) the better able I was to see its eyes. Not two, but two hideous *pairs*, one above the other, blazing with cunning and hatred.

I was chilled. I stared down at it from a distance of only three or four feet. It glared back at me, tilting its head in jerky movements that had the unexpected effect of turning my stomach. Resolutely, I went closer.

"Are you real?"

The only answer I received was a sneer. I have never heard any of these megoolen (for so I came to call them) utter any words. I believe they understand what I say—indeed, everything I so much as *think*, but either speech is denied them or they elect to express themselves only by means of their short, high-pitched snarls or growls. Barely audible sounds, but fierce!

I went nearer still until we were no more than a foot apart. It appeared to have no fear of me; suddenly I realized that *I* was afraid of it. But with the letter opener I slashed at it, suddenly and vigorously, my intention being to cut it into two pieces or knock it against the nearby



wall. To my surprise my swift blow encountered no resistance at all; to my even greater surprise my enemy still stood there. And behind him now was a companion of the same sort! Had my attempt to destroy him brought aid from his preternatural origins?

I seated myself, completely dumbfounded and dismayed. Was I to have these creatures present all the time? How to rid myself of them? I glanced at the back of my right hand, for I felt a burning itch there not unlike a mosquito bite. Two small punctures were visible. Had my blow with the letter opener been avenged? Absurd! In what must be a primeval reaction, the tiny wounds were put to my mouth. Bitterness! Not blood, but bitterness!

"What do you two infernal imps want?" I demanded.

Both of them leaped from their perch onto the floor and raced through the house. I followed: what was running for them was for me an ordinary pace. I was thus conducted to the bedroom where my uncle had died. They jumped effortlessly from the floor to the top of the bedside table, sat on its edge, and pointed with their grotesque arms to the drawer immediately below them. I extended my hand (they made no move to avoid me) and opened the drawer. Into it they descended. There one of them picked up the empty vial that had contained my uncle's sleeping pills. I was not unnerved. Sleeping pills are in common use. I even pointed this out aloud. "Sleeping pills. I frequently gave him sleeping pills. They ensured a better night's rest."

With one jump they were out of the drawer onto the bed. They ran along the edge of it to the foot, then down onto the floor to resume their role of conductors. This time I refused to follow.

The house is a large one, having been built with the first fruits of Uncle Edmund's growing wealth. Although childless, he built a capacious house, larger even than most of the other fine houses to be found in that part of the city. My room was one of several guest rooms. I had occupied it for years.

When I now entered it, the two plagues were already there—at least I assumed it was the same two. Their hideous faces were enough to evoke nausea, but now I noticed for the first time an added loathsomeness. These creatures had an odor. A foul odor unmistakably theirs and unlike any other known to me. A pious missionary, whom I deemed very superstitious, occasionally used to visit my uncle. I now recalled hearing him say that there were times on the mission field when "the Devil was in such hot pursuit of the souls I was after that I could actually *smell* him!" He had described the smell with but one word: *evil*. Whether these imps actually have their origin in Hell I do not undertake to say. But if there be a Hell and if imps like these issue therefrom, I can imagine no more appropriate hallmark of their origin than their odor.

I changed into other clothes, told the butler I would be going out to eat,



and left the house as quickly as I could. It is only two blocks to one of the quietest eating places in the city. Were I to have any company (I could only hope it would remain invisible to others), my intention was to devote all my efforts to ignoring them. I wanted no companions, human or other, until I could bring together the many thoughts struggling in my head.

At first I believed myself to be alone at my table. Then I beheld my megoolen perched on the back of the chair opposite me. Just the one, the Original I now believe it was, for wherever I have come or gone since that hour he has always been present. I did not see his fellow until I returned home.

During the ensuing weeks I became master, not of them certainly, but of my own behavior in the face of their intrusions. The help gave no signs that they were aware of the megoolen. And equally welcome was the fact that they evidenced no awareness of my awareness, so well did I at first manage to conduct myself. Every hour that I was at home they were about me. I slept; they were perched on my blanket, weightless (save for the oppressive burden on my spirit!). I ate; they stood before me on the table, their odor—which I alone sensed without ever betraying the presence of it—taking away all pleasure of the food. I read; they were around me, their captain perched on the book I held. The pages were turned without his moving. I walked; they were underfoot, seeking always to conduct me to the place they wished me to go. This I ignored even more than I ignored them.

They were more than two by now, you must understand. Each time one of them suffered any injury, whether one I vainly attempted to inflict or one occasioned by their own carelessness as when I might step on one of them—each such time their number was augmented. And each such time I was visited with another pair of punctures somewhere on my hands, wrists, feet, or ankles. These healed, but if I put them to my mouth the taste was the match of that insufferable stench.

At length those who served me began to whisper. I inquired skillfully. But all I could conclude from their secretiveness was that I was the occasion of their concern. Faced with this disruption of my life—the very thing I had taken so many pains to avert—I decided to give way to the vicious little horde. One day when the house was empty I allowed them to conduct me where they would. They led, as I feared they might, to a closet in the most remote of the guest rooms. I opened the door of the closet. I even opened the drawer of the medicine chest which they indicated. But I refused to take out the needle.

Instead, I stalked from the room, careless of how many of them I might step on in my haste, went to the car, and drove to a lake some sixty miles away, where I sought refuge in a cottage provided by an acquaintance. Original Megoolen accompanied me at each moment. And



when I retired, there were only the two of us. I fell asleep with a hope fluttering in my mind that there might be a way of delivering myself, if not altogether, at least from the horde. But the following morning the hope evanesced and despair returned. Around me there appeared, one by one, every last demon to which the weeks had given birth.

I took to traveling—a pursuit I have always abhorred rather than sought. Day after day I drove. I took ship to Europe, to islands in the Mediterranean, to South America. I led a life many might envy, but I longed only to rest my head for two consecutive nights in the same place. So simple a wish was denied me. There was always the one, but if I reserved a room for a second night his companions were certain to appear. Even if I lingered in the same city, as I sometimes chose to do, I was obliged to sleep each night in new quarters.

Finally, my distraction being no longer bearable, I returned to my home to see if by any chance the curse there had been lifted. A vain optimism! I proceeded directly to my uncle's physician and unburdened myself for the first time to another human being.

He listened patiently. So I pointed out to him my solitary, ever-present oppression, who stood insolently on the good doctor's desk not more than a yard from either of us. The man smiled. So I showed him the tiny fang marks recently acquired on my hands and one or two I'd found on my ankles. These mystified him. He told the nurse to take some blood for the laboratory and made an appointment for me with a specialist whom he knew well.

That the specialist, Dr. Quill, was a psychiatrist was no surprise; I expected as much. To him I recounted the strange burgeoning of the megoolen, although I was careful not to associate them with the funeral of my uncle. He asked a host of questions. With due discretion he consulted his colleagues. Finally he made the suggestion which I knew to be inevitable.

Before I entered here (I was admitted at my own request) I read the papers very carefully and then asked that they be changed so that, instead of my remaining here without recourse until the board of specialists should see fit to declare that I was cured, I might be privileged to try out a stay. After much debate between Dr. Quill, the Board, and the administration, I was afforded the opportunity to reside here for the first three months with the option of departing at any time I might choose. At the end of that time I elected to remain, now on the conventional terms of the commitment, i.e., until released at the discretion of the Board.

The purpose of the three months must be obvious to you. I had to know whether here, as everywhere else heretofore, the second day's stay would result in the accumulation of my foe's hosts. It did not, nor have they appeared since. Megoolen One is with me at all times, but we are

alone. This is the reason I elected to remain. It is less wearisome than the incessant traveling.

I have been careful at all times. I have not been charged with any crime, nor am I even under any suspicion that I can detect. I have remained in possession of my inheritance in its entirety. My life here is harrowed by my inseparable vigilante but is otherwise uneventful. But what to make of it all?

One of Edgar Allan Poe's characters, a wicked man, was long harassed by a reappearing *doppelganger* who, once slain, was perceived to have been the conscience of the evildoer. In looking back over this infernal business—where it first began, the locations in my residence to which I was led, the unbroken chain of confrontations every single day since he (or they) first appeared, there would seem to be something within myself gruesomely symbolized, which family doctor, the psychiatrist, even the specialists here have been blind to—quite naturally, as it is nothing I can afford to discover to anyone.

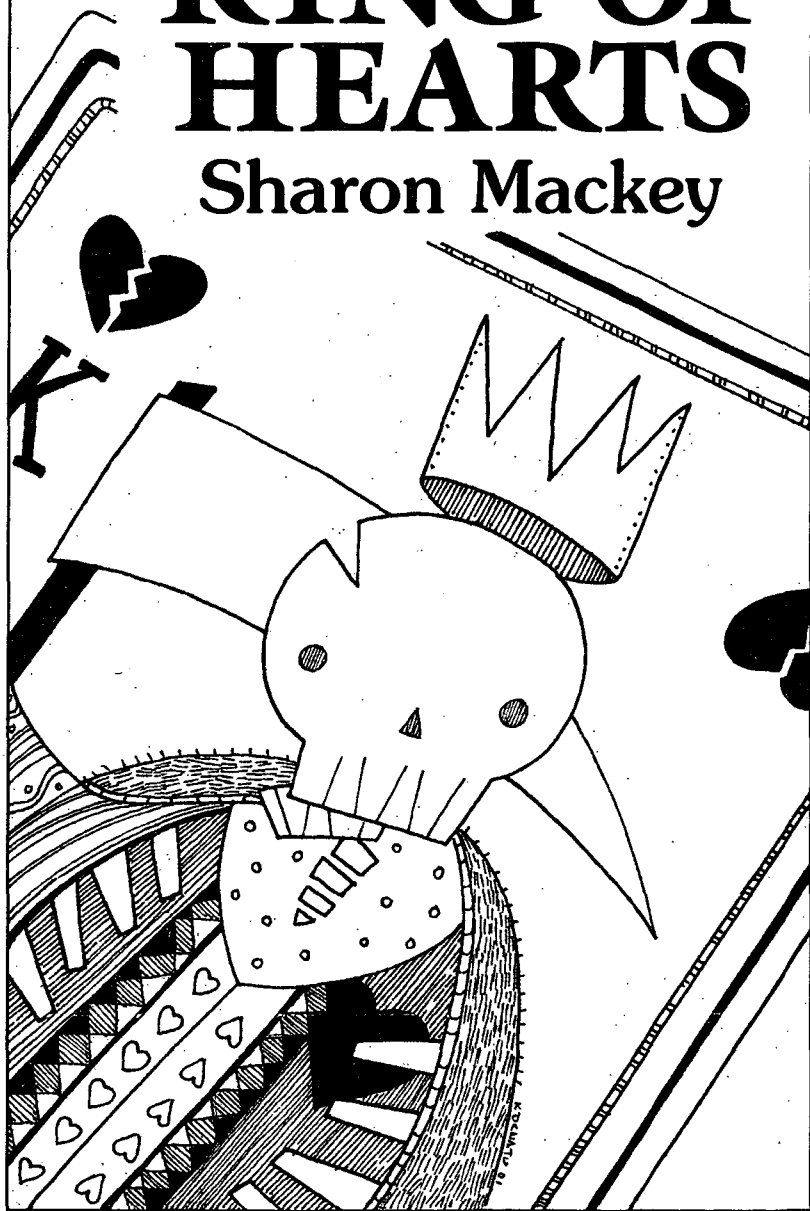
Human companionship is not to be had: this is an asylum for the insane. I can only believe the staff members assume that I am like their other patients. They are to a degree courteous despite this. But in a great many ways, it is very like a prison.

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# KING OF HEARTS

Sharon Mackey



I'd imagined him striding up to my service porch with a Clark Gable finesse, his eyes a dictionary example of "hypnotic" or "Caribbean green."

It was, after all, Friday night. An exotic balmy evening with a ghost moon surfacing high above the sunset. An evening two might spend tarrying outside, arm in arm, whispering behind a fully bloomed hydrangea. Or strolling somewhere.

It was not an evening for bones, not for worrying over shallow back yard graves.

At least the news had come from Clint Knuckles, who had no idea he'd become the standard for "male" in Poke County, not to mention that he read Twain and Dickens and Thurber and taught high school history with the shrewd strategy of a Continental general and *never* said ain't. Never. Not once.

He also knew his head from a tree stump, unlike some men I'd encountered in the town of Deerfoot, a town some would describe as a notch on the Kentucky-Tennessee state line. So I appreciated Clint, I really did. I just never thought he'd be the one to, well, *sabotage* a Friday evening.

It was my third official date as a widow. Three and a half if you counted the last one, the game of poker Clint and I had managed amid my landlady Prudence Geasley's intermittent broom thumps from below and phone threats to raise my rent if I intended to keep company past the hour of ten. This followed by her in-person lectures on appropriate adult behavior and

her contrived, probably rehearsed conversation ordaining her Victorian house the only example of real architecture in Deerfoot. Service porches like hers, she'd said, batting drooping eyelids at Clint, were essential during the turn-of-the-century days when the lifestyles of those inhabiting such sought-after homes required services.

These days, to her dismay, I inhabited the second floor of the Victorian. And I wasn't much of a service to her except for the rent she plied from my teacher's salary and my meager, if any, earnings as a private investigator.

Tonight, Clint and I had planned cocktails in my loft at six, then a tour of the house on Poplar Street he'd just rented with an option to buy, the one with the bluestone and hardwood floors, the one with roughly a mile and a half of asphalt between the front door and the sprightly broomstick of Prudence Geasley.

He was late by half an hour. I smiled prematurely as he proceeded up the stairs looking as disheveled as Clint could look, which meant his usual day-old beard was two days old and his perfectly sculpted jaw was clenched a little too tightly. He then presented the contents of the beat-up leather satchel he'd hauled up my stairs in lieu of a hastily plucked wildflower.

He brought the skull out first, explaining how his new back yard was surrounded by a privacy fence and how there had obviously been a garden of some sort toward a far corner. How he'd taken the padlock off the back gate and left the gate it-

self standing wide open while he spent two hours at the high school gym assisting at basketball practice. How he'd returned to find every neighborhood kid and his dog loitering in his yard and around the gate, the kids waving the skull, the dogs rooting around in the corner garden.

The remnants of our unfinished card game—and now the skull—lay on my antique butternut table, my full house of kings looking less than regal beneath a pair of horse-like front teeth.

I picked it up, my palm stretched over the cranium. Behind and north of the left ear there were two crescent-shaped fractures, one larger where the bone had pushed through, making a hole in the skull, and one smaller, a dent, maybe a practice blow for the second, fatal one. There were also three gold crowns scattered among the upper molars. "Great smile," I said, resting the skull on the cards.

"Thanks," said Clint. He leaned forward in my dining room chair, elbows on knees. "This—" he nodded toward the skull "—isn't all." He reached into the satchel and pulled out the soiled, stiff fragment of what appeared to be a man's toupee. He held it out as if it were roadkill. "This is what the dogs found first." He balanced it on top of the leering skull, gold teeth shining like beckoning lights in a cavern. "The boys told me they thought it was some kind of dead animal. When they got a closer look, they got suspicious because the dogs wouldn't leave the garden alone. They said the skull was already showing and

they dug it out in a matter of minutes." He leaned back, arms folded, long sturdy legs stretched out and crossed at the ankles. "Any ideas?" he said. "You're the expert."

Clint was wrong. I am not *the* expert, not even *an* expert. I am an accidental P.I. who got involved in the business because of my late husband's law practice, which was criminal defense. He was too cheap to hire a P.I. when he really needed one, maybe a retired police detective or a disillusioned ex-F.B.I. rookie, so he got me when I wasn't chaperoning high school proms or cursing a faulty overhead projector or grading vast amounts of miscalculated algebra homework.

Besides, Clint already knew what I was thinking. We both knew who owned the house, who'd lived there before him, a chiropractor and his fourth wife who had stayed in Deerfoot just long enough to provide the right amount of scandal for a gossip-prone town like Deerfoot.

I sat down across from Clint on the edge of my refurbished Georgian settee. "We have to call Don Earl," I said, disappointed at the turn the evening had taken.

"Yeah, I know," Clint lowered his movie star chin, his eyes chock-full of tender romance. He said something significant and heartfelt, I could tell by the way one eyebrow bristled, but his voice didn't come through loudly or clearly because Prudence Geasley had, once again, engaged her mighty broomstick.

Three staccato thumps. It was part of what Prudie called her "broom code." This one meant she was coming up, probably with a

bottle of cheap wine or a lesson on in-house etiquette. After all, Clint had arrived.

She must've tossed the broom aside, liquor in hand, and power-walked to the service porch. The knock came in ten seconds and had me on the stairs in two.

I halted halfway down, remembering my rent was due the second Prudie stuck in her cottony white shocks of hair and proceeded up the stairs with the breath of an intoxicated dinosaur. In the same hand she held a half-full bottle of scotch by the neck and an empty souvenir jigger from Panama City Beach.

"I won't detain you," she said. "Just need to collect the rent and say hello to Clifford. He is here, isn't he?" She was minding her footing on the stairs, her free hand raising the hem of a seersucker housecoat.

I darted upward in front of her and looked for my checkbook while signaling Clint to hide the skull without saying, "Clint, hide the skull." Prudie's reaction to surprises was always unpredictable. She'd upped my rent once for babysitting a neighbor's pet hamster. But Clint was perusing a book he'd found on my shelf, *The Art of Advocacy*, a leftover from my late husband. I couldn't get his attention.

She reached the top, looked around, and spotted the skull and toupee propped against my deck of now-scattered cards like a warning to cheaters.

"Here, Prudie, here's the rent," I held out the signed check. She ignored me, her wild blue party eyes

shrinking into a birdlike gaze, fixed solely on the skull.

"Evening Ms. Geasley," said Clint. He stood up briefly, holding the book, then sat down again next to the skull, smiling as if he were the proud excavator of human remains and he saw no need to hide the fact.

Prudie absentmindedly snatched the check and tucked it into the large square pocket of her housecoat. She plopped down on my sofa, balanced the bottle and jigger on her lap, and asked me for a tall glass and some ice.

She sat comfortably between me and Clint on the settee sipping her drink of choice, jigger in pocket, her ancient artifact of a bottle tucked at her side. "I distinctly remember Dr. Burncastle wearing a toupee," she said. "His little wig would always slip down when he worked on my spine, but who the hell cared! It was part of his charm. Did I mention he was a saint? Made me feel twenty-two again every time he cracked my spine back into place. I would've done anything to get him to stay, but then I didn't know he was leaving. Nobody knew. He just—" she snapped a finger "—upped and left." She eyed the skull looking herself a likely companion for Frankenstein's monster, her snowy wisps of hair more askew than usual, blue eyes wide with the advent of mouthwatering gossip, and her housecoat fastened a button too late at the throat.

"Dr. John Burncastle," she said as if the name were a tasty morsel, "left town almost a year ago.

There'd been rumors that he was harassing his secretary in a lustful manner. You know what I mean. Scandal." She laid a spidery hand on Clint's arm. He'd found a beer and another book, *Mississippi Writings* by Mark Twain. "Oh, Cliff, the gossip was profuse. And in a town this small, guilty or not the man was obviously humiliated. He was losing patients. Male patients, that is. The women still flocked there like ducks to white bread. But of course women have always flocked toward men like Dr. B. You know, the six feet tall kind who swagger when they walk. That was him to a tee. He had a sort of magnetic . . . *magnetism*." Prudie craned her neck toward Clint as if to further emphasize the allure of John Burncastle.

Then she frowned, her lower lip puckering like an infant's. "Anyway, it was rumored there was gonna be a lawsuit, his reputation was gonna be smeared from here to kingdom come, so one weekend, when his wife was out of town on one of her pharmaceutical trips, he packed a few suitcases and skipped town—" she took a dramatic slurp of her drink and whispered "*never to return*."

"Who was the secretary, Prudie?"

"Did the sheriff investigate?" asked Clint, skimming a densely printed page of Twain's *Pudd'n-head Wilson*.

"The secretary was Twyla Monroe. Works at her mother's dress shop now. You know the one, Marcy, Vivian's on Main Street." She flung a hand at Clint. "And there was nothing to investigate, Clifford.

He took only what he needed, including the car, but left the house practically full of furniture. For Mrs. Burncastle, of course. Poor thing."

"How do you know all this, Prudie?" I took her empty glass. I didn't want to make a night of picking Prudie's brain, which was a lot like her liquor, tart and aged past its prime.

She sat up straight and hiccupped. "From Mrs. Burncastle, of course. When she wasn't out of town selling pharmaceuticals, she got manicures at My Lady Salon, same place I get my hair done. She didn't deny she should never have married the man, and she certainly never liked the idea of being his fourth bride, but she was crazy about him, thought she could change him, you know how the story goes. After a while she cleaned out the house and put it up for sale. Nobody knew it was . . . tainted." She blinked at the skull, then at Clint. "No offense, Clifford." She patted his arm feebly.

Clint downed the rest of his beer, a repressed chuckle apparent in his emerging dimples.

I set Prudie's glass next to the skull.

"There's no such thing, Prudie, as a haunted—"

"I didn't say haunted, I said tainted, there's a difference. We must call the sheriff, Marcy," she said between hiccups. "There's a murderer roaming the streets. If you won't make the call, I will." She stood up and toddled down the stairs, finding the jigger in her pocket and forgetting the bottle.

Sheriff Don Earl Keck examined the cranium fractures, adjusted his stiff grey hat, grimaced at Prudie's empty bottle of scotch on the sofa, and crunched the last of the peppermint Life Savers he'd been peeling off since he'd arrived twenty minutes ago. He'd occasionally glared at Clint:

Don Earl was not happy. Not only had we roused him from his coveted radio stint of emceeing a championship bass fishing tournament, he was incensed that the skull had been removed from the original burial site and hauled over to my dining room table "like trophy turkey." There was one proper way to handle a situation like that, he said: to leave the bones be and call law enforcement.

Clint answered that the grave was superficial, and the dogs had done most of the digging and the kids had done the rest. That he'd been discreet in transporting the skull, and he hadn't thought any harm would come of harnessing my opinion on the matter, that it might even pique my superb investigative instincts. Don Earl replied that competence would be required, not incidental in a situation of this magnitude.

A moment of tension-filled silence followed during which I tried to admire the elegant carved shells on my Georgian settee; then Don Earl headed for the squad car tight-lipped, Clint's loaded satchel in tow. He said he'd was gonna have a look at that grave for himself, that a *professional* would unearth any other bones and send them to a medical

examiner where a *professional* autopsy could be performed.

The squad car was parked in front of the slate blue cottage on Poplar, Clint's house, and Don Earl was scribbling furiously on a clipboard behind the steering wheel.

Clint parked his Plymouth beneath huge shedding trees in the driveway, at the end of which sat a one-car garage with old fashioned hinged doors fastened by a heavy, rusty lock. The houses in the neighborhood were close together, and one wall of the garage appeared to be the property line for the adjacent house.

Young voices permeated the neighborhood, the echoes of hide-and-seek in progress, and I'd already noticed a small crouching figure behind a row of thriving holly bushes flanking the front bay window.

Clint stood at the hood of the Plymouth crooking his arm for me to follow as if we were late for a gala event. I got out of the convertible, and he unlocked a seven foot high pine gate, ushering me and then a ruddy, stone-faced Don Earl into a charmingly landscaped back yard surrounded by a fence overgrown with English ivy. A plank swing hung from a towering oak tree in the back, and bluestone created a serpentine path through the yard to a couple of cement benches and a rectangular garden of approximately ten by twenty feet. The yard had been designed for seclusion, complete isolation, deadly privacy.

"Lovely place for a cemetery," I said. Don Earl graced my observa-



tion with a brief, disgusted shake of his head.

Clint shut the gate behind us.

Fresh mounds of dirt lay around one end of the garden, where a six inch deep hole revealed a damp, craterlike impression where the skull had been. A dry, hard, crumpled mass of clothing had been exposed as well as more bone, a collarbone, I guessed, and some vertebrae. The body appeared to have been buried on an incline, with the head in shallower ground than the rest as if to pillow the wound. A few garden trowels lay scattered around the hole, the tools of reckless child archaeologists.

I didn't linger there. I followed the flat stone beneath my shoes to the back door, leaving Clint alone with Don Earl's strained comments about indecent burials with no flowers, no kind words, no loved ones, and mute skeletons left behind to tell the sordid story.

But I'd already surmised that the victim had been buried by someone who cared. Someone who took the trouble to make sure the toupee was in place as the body was covered, probably easing the sight of the fatal head wound for the killer, perhaps providing some kind of false comfort for the dead.

The screened-in porch, one step up from the back yard, was long and narrow with wooden floors painted bluish gray. Through a glass door I could see a butcher's block and a large pot rack hanging like a cloud above a bluntly shaped island. I stepped into the kitchen, where the house became a study in posts and beams; exposed oak ceil-

ing joists meeting in pegged corners connected with other continuing beams, mostly poplar or walnut. I followed the wood as if it were a crude map down a long hallway, stopping where a knotty poplar post formed part of a doorway. The doorway was the entrance to a wainscoted bedroom with slanted ceilings, two windows, and a walk-in closet, where Clint had installed a computer and piles of books.

The foyer at the other end of the hallway, apparently, Clint's unloading dock from the street, was crowded with an unplugged stereo, a floor lamp, and cardboard boxes stuffed with *American History* magazine. I nearly tripped over the boxes, opened an elegant oak door, and slipped down the curved concrete steps to the front walk. I whistled for warning, strolling toward the holly, then said, "Who's there?"

"Nobody," came the answer. I could hear rushing, searching footsteps in adjacent yards, nearby yelps of surrender.

"I need to ask you something," I whispered. "It won't take long, it's important."

"You with the police?" He emerged a little then, on hands and knees, a boy with dark, thick hair, chocolate brown eyes, and chocolate eyelashes.

"Sort of." I crouched to his level. "Did you know the people who used to live here, the Burncastles?" He shrugged, then suddenly retreated into the bushes when a sandy-haired boy came dashing around the corner and ran on by. He emerged again, cautiously.

"Did you know the Burncastles,

or ever talk to them?" I said. He half nodded, half shrugged. "You hide here a lot?" A decided nod.

"But I can't talk any more," he said. He withdrew into the holly and left me pleading with the shrubbery. He wouldn't come out again, not for a five dollar bill or the Mark McGwire key chain I didn't really have.

I joined Clint and the sheriff at the back gate, where three of the sheriff's cronies and the coroner were lumbering to the grave with flashlights, shovels, and picks.

"We can't jump to conclusions like that," Don Earl was saying to Clint, still irritated. "We don't know for sure who this is."

"I think we can rule out Anastasia," Clint said to me, eyebrows framing his blue-green eyes like two gables.

I tore myself away and faced the sheriff.

"Don Earl, did you investigate when Burncastle left town?"

His stiff grey hat shadowed most of his face. He was reluctant to answer. "It didn't look suspicious, Marcy," he finally said in a low growl. "But to ease your superb mind," he glanced at Clint, "Mrs. Burncastle came to me after she hadn't heard from her husband for two, three months. She suspected he'd run off with another woman he'd been seeing before he left, maybe one of his patients, but she couldn't say who. She wasn't surprised at his leaving, since he'd done the same thing to three other wives, but she hadn't received as much as a phone call from him.

"I checked out the place he'd lived

before this, a small town in Virginia. A woman there had filed a lawsuit against him for unseemly office behavior, and shortly thereafter he and Mrs. Burncastle had moved to Deerfoot. To start anew, I suppose." Before I could ask my next question he added, "All of Burncastle's personal effects and suitcases disappeared the weekend of October thirtieth, including his car. Now, if you don't mind, I have work—"

"What about bank accounts. If he'd intended to leave, he would've liquidated or transferred money," said Clint.

Don Earl looked over his shoulder at a few bystanders assembling on the curb. He lowered his voice.

"I don't think you've got the full picture here, Mr. Knuckles. John Burncastle could work miracles with an aching back, but he was a two-timin', schemin', self-absorbed—" He took a breath. "His wife suspected all kinds of things. She thought maybe he had bank accounts she didn't know about." He began to walk away.

We were pushing our luck with Don Earl, and I knew it. But I had to ask. "What about the car?" I called. "If this body—"

"Darn it, we don't know this is Burncastle," said Don Earl, pivoting. His hat jerked back and forth from me to Clint. "Mr. Knuckles, you won't have any privacy for a while, and Marcy—" he paused, a sarcastic gleam in his eye "—I'm surprised you let me in on this one."

The state police arrived and immediately wanted to investigate the grave, explore the house, and question Clint as well as the

stream of neighbors Don Earl had been shooing away with his hat.

It was midnight when the sheriff offered me a ride home, and one o'clock when Clint called me to say that the clothing on the victim had been a bathrobe embroidered with the letter *B*, in large ornate script.

**I**'m not sure what I was thinking when I got dressed early Saturday morning, hopped in my pickup, and drove four blocks down Main Street, finding Vivian's on Main open and ready for business. Perhaps that Don Earl wanted this one for himself but half the town would know about the Burncastle skeleton before noon. That if the killer were still in Deerfoot, he or she would have time to tie up loose ends, destroy evidence, or even skip town before the skeleton was positively identified. Don Earl had probably reserved the morning for tracking down Burncastle's wife, then finding dental records. Then he would start on witnesses and potential suspects.

Vivian's on Main was a long-standing women's clothing boutique I'd never frequented because of the extreme fashions (either dowdy or trendy, nothing in between). The store window was inhabited by two mannequins, one wearing a red fringed leather miniskirt with a tight teddy bear-emblazoned sweater and the other a pond-colored shroud with large black buttons, no doubt the choices of the mother-daughter team who ran the store.

I entered, a bell jingling somewhere above my head alerting the

young woman I knew to be Twyla Monroe, a twenty-something voluptuous blonde. She stood at the cash register fidgeting with a leopard print scarf thrown carelessly but stylishly about her shoulders while a mature, silver-haired woman wearing a plain brown dress, Twyla's mother Vivian, scrubbed my fingerprints from the door I'd just entered. The smell of lemony perfume, retail clothing, and coffee was thick, almost euphoric.

Twyla was dressed to sell in a cinched safari-type two-piece adorned with endangered-species accessories. She walked toward me confidently with an unconscious swing of the hip.

"You're our fiftieth customer of the month!" she said clasping her hands in sync with the rhythm of her sway. She leaned against a glass-topped curio cabinet full of brass belt buckles and informed me with enthusiasm that I had won an extra ten percent discount off whatever I intended to purchase that day. She pointed with a long frosted nail to a bulletin board tacked with Polaroids of other surprised fiftieth customers dressed in outfits purchased from Vivian's with the prize discount.

I feigned amazement and pretended to browse through a rack of pale pink nighties nobody could possibly sleep comfortably in. Twyla was combing through a rack next to me, breathlessly exclaiming how pleats on short skirts are a godsend, while the older and statelier Vivian straightened some of the crooked Polaroids with a glazed, pleasant face.

"Actually," I said, "I'm here to ask about a private matter. I need some . . ." I inadvertently held up one of the pink nightgowns.

"Lingerie?" Twyla took a short shapely walk to where I was standing, gesturing toward the nightie with compassion as if it had a disability. "You do not have to be embarrassed about purchasing lingerie, Miss Murdock!" She tossed her leopard print scarf over her shoulder. "Wearing lingerie is an inexpensive luxury. Every woman secretly longs for a beautiful, flowing peignoir. You should not be ashamed!" Twyla reached around me. "These are very popular," she said, snatching a thin, pink, low-cut swatch of gauze.

I took a step backward. "I need to know about John Burncastle."

Twyla sighed heavily. Vivian's lips curled, then disappeared. "Are you working on—a case?" asked Vivian in a throaty but controlled voice.

"Just browsing," I said. So she knew. I wasn't surprised. The whole town probably knew by now that I was in the business of snooping around. The clear, sharp ring of a telephone broke whatever intense train of thought Twyla appeared to be mustering. She whirled toward the phone, entangling her hips in a gaudy display of sequined bathing suit coverups. She cursed the "silly garments," then stomped toward the back, catching it on the fifth ring.

"I suppose you know Twyla didn't always work in retail here with me," said Vivian solemnly, smoothing the lap of her dress with a lint

brush. "She was a secretary, a very *good* secretary." She was now brushing her sleeves. I looked interested, impressed. "She loved that other job. Was making good money, too, until . . . the trouble started."

"Trouble?" I asked just as Twyla came gushing back.

"That was May Storms," she said, hot-faced. "She said she was returning that yellow skirt I sold her even though she loved it! She said it just wasn't right for livin' here in Deerfoot, that people would stare! It's just not fair. A woman ought to be able to wear what she wants, clingy knits or satiny silk, supple wool or fringe or slits or whatever! A woman ought to be able to wear what she wants without being—harassed!"

"Twyla's been through an ordeal," said Vivian, now moving in a slow circle around Twyla with the lint brush.

"Ordeal?" I stood still as if I'd sensed the first low rumble of an earthquake.

"We ought to be able to wear our sequins with pride without some lowlife womanizer thinking he can have what he wants," Twyla continued, tapping a cheetah-print shoe on the carpet. "You want to know about Burncastle, I'll tell you about Dr. John Burncastle. Oh, he thought he was somethin'." She raised an arm wrapped in tortoiseshell bracelets.

"Thing was, he was a good doctor, just couldn't pass you in the hall without sizing up your figure or making cracks about what lewd magazines you'd been reading 'cause you sure do know how to

dress. I told him all I read is *Reader's Digest*."

"She can't help her figure, that's the good Lord's doing," said Vivian, pointing hipward with the lint brush.

"And the other women in the office, Burncastle treated them the same way?" I asked.

"Oh no, it was just me," said Twyla. "I was his only employee; it was a small operation. Except for the cleaning lady, Edith Webb. And thank the Lord he didn't pick on her. She's so frail. Sweet gal, but I can't imagine any man would ever look at her. If you know what I mean."

Vivian dropped the lint brush and quickly retrieved it.

"So you knew Edith pretty well?"

"Not really," said Twyla. "She seemed nice. Poor as a church mouse, though. She didn't even own a car, walked everywhere she went. Remember the cashmere, Mama?"

Vivian frowned. "No, I don't believe I—"

"It was late October, and I found out it was Edith's birthday," Twyla explained. "Her clothes were always so out of date, so I sent her a cashmere sweater in the mail there at the chiropractic office so I could watch her open it. It was a crew-neck with ribbed cuffs, baby blue. I didn't say who it was from, kinda like a Secret Pal. I didn't want Edith to feel obliged, but I wanted her to have something she couldn't afford."

"Twyla has always been very thoughtful," said Vivian.

"Anyway, Edith must've been

worried about who sent the sweater and figured out it could've come from Mama's shop. She came in here twice asking about it. Mama, of course, couldn't tell."

"Twyla told me not to." Vivian was gripping the lint brush.

"Oh, Mama, that was nothin'. She got over it." Twyla fussed with her leopard print scarf. "It was after that that Dr. B. got *way* out of line. It was the day I wore my peach silk. The office needed to be decorated for Hallóween. I was reaching high, pinning cardboard pumpkins on the wall, and he waltzed over and—well, it was humiliating what he thought he could get away with. That's the day I threatened to bring the lawsuit."

"But you never did, only threatened to?"

She nodded. "The scaredy-cat left town before we could file suit. I just wish I could've made him suffer, admit what he'd done and make retribution."

"You mean restitution, dear," said Vivian.

"How can I get in touch with Edith?" I felt like a spectator in a tennis match.

"When I knew her, she lived at the City Hall Apartments," said Twyla. "I've seen her in the library on occasion, shelving books."

"I doubt the poor girl could help you," said Vivian. "She seems to have some problems." She pointed gingerly to her temple.

When I left, Vivian was sitting in a chair by the window looking out on Main Street like a dazed mannequin. I'd declined using my discount prize on lingerie, but Twyla

had noticed I had "million dollar thighs" and found an "ensemble with a leather touch" she swore would make me feel as if I'd died and gone to heaven in a brand-new limousine, and not only that, it was practical "'cause when you need a leather skirt, you really need one."

Twyla tacked my Polaroid in a metallic blue leather skirt and fur-collared sweater to the row of stunned extra ten percent winners, and I walked out with an outfit I could wear when I auditioned for the Dallas Cowboy cheerleaders.

I wondered what Vivian had meant by Edith Webb's alleged "problems" and supposed I could pry information from Prudie's renowned knowledge of Deerfoot folk, something I was reluctant to do for fear she'd be asking about the skeleton and giving her uninformed opinion as to who the killer was, now that she'd had time to think about it.

I'd decided to look for Edith Webb at the library about the time I drove past Clint's house. The garage doors were ajar, held loosely together by the bright yellow crime tape wrapped around them and the fence surrounding the grave. Apparently the sheriff's cohorts had neglected to lock the garage, or perhaps they'd found something of interest on the lock.

I knew Clint wasn't home. It was Saturday morning, and he would be at the high school gym smack in the middle of a faculty basketball game, probably executing one of the brilliant three-point shots he was already famous for over there.

I pulled my weathered red pick-up into the bluestone driveway, a light rain drumming on the windshield. I thought I heard voices inside the garage and ducked under the four layers of tape, squeezing through the wooden doors.

The garage was apparently empty except for an old refrigerator and some chipped painted wall shelves scattered with small, unwanted hardware. The whispers coming from the other side of the refrigerator suddenly hushed. I scooted past a tic-tac-toe game drawn on the dusty floor and found them crouched against the side of the refrigerator burying their faces in their hands. Neither of them was more than maybe eight. The older one, with sandy brown hair, freckles, and wincing eyes peeked at me first.

"It's okay," I said, crouching. "Do you live next door?"

They stood up, the older one disgusted they'd been found, and the younger, dark-haired one anxious to chat. "I can spell antidisestablishmentarianism," he said with eager brown eyes.

"Shh," nudged the older one. "We're not supposed to talk to strangers."

"We're not supposed to play in the Burncastles' garage either, but we're doin' it, ain't we?"

"I'm Marcy," I said.

"I'm Mack," said the dark-haired one, "and he's my brother Zach."

Zach sighed. "You got a last name?"

"Murdock. And you?"

"Smith. I touched the skull," said Mack.



"We don't know anything about that skull," Zach protested. "They already asked us. Sammy Johnson lives across the street, he's the one who dug it out."

"Did either of you know Mr. Burncastle?"

"We can't talk to *strangers*," said Zach emphatically, wondering when I was going to get his drift.

I looked at Mack. "Aren't you the one I saw under the holly bush last night?"

"He always hides under there. It's his secret hiding place."

Zach giggled, and Mack looked horrified that his secret was out in the open.

"I'm telling!" he shouted, shoving his fists down at his side, marching away.

"No, don't. Wait," I called after him. "If you can answer my questions, I won't tell a soul. Cross my heart and hope to die."

"Yeah, you go tell Kelly, and we'll both be in trouble for playing in the garage. She'll know," said Zach. "She thinks we're upstairs watching that dumb Pooh movie. What questions?"

"Who's Kelly?" I said.

"Our sitter."

Mack was marching back with resigned look on his face. "Stick a needle in your eye?"

"Okay, needle in the eye, whatever," I said, beginning to feel a toll on my nerves. I breathed deeply. "Do you remember the day Mr. Burncastle, your neighbor, left for good? His wife stayed for a while, but he left before she did."

"That's gotta be the dumbest question I ever heard," said Zach,

planting his fists against his ribcage.

"Yeah, how're we supposed to remember that? It was like five years ago."

"No, it was Halloween, last year. Don't you remember last Halloween? You two go trick-or-treating, don't you? I bet you had neat costumes and—"

"I was a gargoyle," said Mack.

"And Mrs. Burncastle wouldn't answer the door to give us candy."

"And she was home, too."

"It wasn't day, it was night," said Zach.

"Night?" I asked.

"'Cause I got to play in the garage in my Batman costume Halloween day 'cause his big black car was gone and it was too cold to play outside in the open air."

Mack was jumping up and down. "Tigger," he said. "It snowed that night, and Mom made me wear pajamas under my gargoyle costume, and we could only go to six houses 'cause Mom was—"

"It snowed on Halloween?" I was trying to remember.

"Not on Halloween," said Zach, "the night before, just enough to cover—"

"You coulda pretended the car was your Batmobile."

"That's good, now we're getting somewhere, I think," I said.

Zach glanced down at Mack, who shuffled closer to his big brother. "It was real warm the night before," said Zach, "and nobody knew it was gonna snow for heaven's sake and Mom said she was gonna walk to the market and get some candy and—"

"She was missing," said Mack. "Then she came back and we could only go to six houses 'cause Mom was cryin' all the time." He thrust his open palms toward me as if the gesture might help him explain.

"Your mom was sad at Halloween?"

Zach sighed. "She was sad when she came home from the grocery store and they didn't have any candy. Kelly wanted to go home, it was getting late, but our mom was missing. She was gone to the grocery store for three hours tryin' to find candy."

"That same night? The night you went trick-or-treat—"

"Three and a half," said Mack.

"The night before," said Zach.

"The night before Halloween your mother was gone for three hours to the store? Where was your father?"

"Workin' third shift at the railroad."

"And after that Mr. Burncastle's car was gone and you could play in here?"

They nodded in unison.

"Didn't Mrs. Burncastle ever keep her car in the garage?"

They shook their heads. "She always parked on the street and went in the front," said Zach.

"So your mom was gone three and a half hours the night before last Halloween?"

"And she didn't bring home no licorice whips," said Mack, pouting.

"Do you think I could talk to your mother?"

"She's at the dentist," said Zach.

"Gettin' braces put on her teeth." Mack made a cute ugly face.

"One more thing. Did you see Mr. Burncastle drive his car away the night before Halloween?"

They shook their heads, rolled their eyes. I stood up, found two dollars in my pocket, and dropped one in each of their open palms. "Thanks," I said. They ogled the money in disbelief as if their memories were worth more than a measly dollar.

I drove back to the Victorian, hung my new outfit in the closet, and fixed a meal of hot tea and some savory sweet potato biscuits Prudie had baked two days ago. Her liquor may be suspect, but Prudie's cooking is her religion and I'd become a convert months ago.

I turned on my desk lamp, ignoring the stack of algebra tests I should've been grading, and doodled with a pen on a legal pad, making a list that turned out to look more like a triangle with Burncastle in the middle. Vivian and Twyla and the threat of a lawsuit formed one point of the triangle, Mack and Zach's story of their mother's three-hour grocery spree was the second, and at the third, the name Edith Webb and the word cashmere. I made some other miscellaneous notes about Burncastle's car and Vivian's reserved demeanor at the dress shop, which had been teasing me like a rock in my shoe since I'd left the Monroe family business.

I thumbed through the thin but reliable Deerfoot telephone directory searching for an Edith Webb. Finding nothing. I decided to call on Deerfoot's oldest source of fairly-re-

liable gossip before making a personal appearance at the library.

Prudie answered the door with flour on her face and a rolling pin in her fist and said if she knew an Edith Webb it was the daughter of the late young James L. Webb, the mechanic who used to work on her daddy's 1952 Thunderbird. That is, when he was alive, but now they were both dead, James and her daddy. Edith was only twelve or so when she lost her father, and she'd never married. The last she'd heard, Edith Webb, poor thing, lived at the City Hall Apartments and worked days at the library.

I left Prudie at the front door wielding the rolling pin while divulging her absolute hunch that Twyla was the killer and if I didn't wanna be six feet under by dinner-time I'd better stay out of the whole mess and learn to cook because Clifford, the one I *should* be chasing, has a stomach like the rest of the human race and he just might want a woman who knows how to whip up more than a scotch on the rocks.

The rain had stopped for the moment, but the sky was the color of gunmetal, lending a sobering dreariness to the afternoon. I decided to drive to the library since rain was still a threat and my big black umbrella was missing one too many spokes.

The library was located six blocks down Main followed by a left turn beside the Four Seasons Funeral Home. I slowed the truck to a crawl when I saw Don Earl in the squad car screeching away from the prime parking spot in front of Vivian's

shop. He'd probably popped a Life Saver, then told them about the skeleton and forced Twyla to recount everything she'd already told me.

When I passed the shop, I spotted Vivian, her tall frame a somber shadow inside the polished glass front door.

The Deerfoot Public Library is an ancient brown brick building with whitewashed columns. It's open until four on Saturdays, which meant I had an hour before closing.

I wasn't sure I would know Edith Webb when I saw her. Partly, I supposed, because I'd quit frequenting the library months ago after I'd misplaced and never returned a copy of *The Great Gatsby*.

I opened the heavy oak door and saw Mrs. Lela McKeehan, head librarian and nemesis when it came to returning books and paying fines. She stood at the front desk scrutinizing a returned copy of *The Cat in the Hat* for dogeared pages while a scared six-year-old tried to steal away unseen. I ducked into the biography section, wandered through the rows past an elderly man behind a newspaper, and found refuge in a secluded reference room hung with faded Impressionist pictures in faux-gilt frames.

She was sitting on the carpet behind a library table, reading a paperback romance novel with the concentration of a microbiologist. I vaguely remembered her then, a hovering, ethereal presence behind the shadow of Lela McKeehan.

"Edith?" I stood over her, looking down.

She shut the book and stood up, knocking over a cumbersome stack of encyclopedias on the floor that she was apparently supposed to be organizing. She wore dangling transparent heart earrings and a sweatshirt depicting deer grazing in a mountaintop mist. She was fair-complexioned and petite, almost frail looking, with thin, waist-long hair and eyes as grey as a cat's fur.

"Oh, um, can I help you?" she asked in a delicate nasal voice. She looked older than Twyla but younger than I am, maybe early thirty-something.

"My name is Marcy. I need to ask you a few questions." I was whispering. The last thing I needed was for Lela McKeehan to find an employee sloughing work and a patron at the top of the library's No Lending list in the same room.

Edith waited, clutching the romance novel against her chest.

"How well did you know John Burncastle?"

Her grey eyes narrowed. "Why? Is he back? Is something wrong?" She looked embarrassed and began hoisting encyclopedias onto the table, a task that immediately took the breath out of her. "He just—left," she looked up, "without saying goodbye, without . . ." She hoisted the last stack with a thud and momentarily closed her eyes. "Is he okay?"

"No," I said. "That's why I'm here."

She folded her arms and peered warily at Monet's *Waterlilies*. After a while she said, "He was in love with me, you know, not with Twyla. It was a respectable kind of love,

not cheap, not like the feelings he had for Twyla."

I spoke carefully. "Did he ever make a pass at you?"

She shook her head at the painting, her gaze fixed on the watery image. "But he gave me a present for my birthday. Oh, he didn't put his name on it or anything, he wanted to be my secret admirer, but I knew it was from him. It was a token of his love. For me. A silent declaration."

"What was it, Edith?"

She looked at me briefly, tears welling up in her eyes. "I only wore it once."

"Did you ever tell him how you felt?"

She switched her gaze to Monet's *Field of Poppies* and gave a little cry or a laugh, I couldn't tell which. "He would never admit it. It would've spoiled the game. He lived to play games, like the ones he played with Twyla. She amused him. King Burncastle." Her voice was now raspy.

"When did you tell him, Edith? Where? At his office? Did you go to his home when his wife was away?"

She took her eyes off the painting and gave me a silver-eyed stare that told me our little question-and-answer session was over. "Some things are private," she said, then began shoving encyclopedias with remarkable renewed energy onto an empty shelf in no apparent order.

I left thinking that the petite and frail Edith Webb could've summoned the strength if the emotional climate had been right, if she'd had the right weapon, if something

twisted and powerful had propelled her. She could've killed John Burncastle when he wasn't expecting it.

Prudence had said Burncastle was six feet tall. I wondered how anyone the size of Edith Webb could've managed hauling the body out to the back yard, then digging the grave. Unless she'd had an accomplice. Twyla crossed my mind, but so did Vivian, and Lela McKeegan. Three strong women, each of them industrious enough to have helped dispose of an automobile.

When I reached the Victorian, there was a woman sitting in my office nervously bouncing a crossed leg up and down. She wore a nurse's uniform, had a headful of curly black hair and braces on her teeth. She said that her name was Donna Smith and that she was the mother of Mack and Zach. She hoped I didn't mind, but my landlady saw her waiting outside on the steps and let her in. Her sons had told her all about our little visit in the garage earlier in the day, and she had something to add only if she had my solemn promise not to breathe a word of it to anyone because it would ruin her family and her life.

She stood up, wailed and wrung her hands, then told me she'd had an affair with John Burncastle. I listened, thankful I'd never met the man. She said she'd gone to his house last October thirtieth for "a rendezvous." She knew his wife was out of town. In the midst of the rendezvous the doorbell rang. She hid in the closet, and John threw on his robe and his toupee to answer the door. Donna Smith said she was

surprised because she hadn't heard a car drive up and she was terrified that Mrs. Burncastle had come home early from her pharmaceutical trip.

But it wasn't Mrs. Burncastle. It was another woman trying to thank John Burncastle for something that was just the right size, something he'd given her, something the woman said had jolted her into realizing how he, Dr. Burncastle, had felt all along. John kept denying he'd given the woman anything. Finally the woman told John she loved him. That was the real reason she'd come, to tell him she loved him. She had to tell him while his wife was away because she didn't know when she'd get another chance.

Donna Smith said John Burncastle had laughed out loud. In fact he'd laughed so hard Donna had almost started laughing herself, right there in the closet, until she heard a terrible sort of thud-clank, and then John moaning. The second, third, and fourth thud-clanks put a stop to the moaning. The woman started crying hysterically, trying to rouse John Burncastle, but there was no sound for a long time except for the crying. The woman stayed in the kitchen forever while Donna Smith stood in the closet with a sheet wrapped around her. After an hour or two Donna was able to get dressed while the woman, whom she never saw, got sick in the bathroom. Donna Smith said she rushed out the front door without looking back, went home, and never breathed a word to anyone for fear she would

have to testify in court and bring the affair into the open. From her upstairs window next door she saw John Burncastle's car being driven from the garage way past midnight.

I followed Donna Smith outside to her car, then jogged to Prudie's front door. I knocked more loudly this time, and she answered with a carrot and a butcher knife, informing me Clint had been looking for me and she thought the wife had done it because the doctor had had too much magnetism for one woman. I asked her if she knew where James L. Webb the mechanic used to work, and whether the building was still standing and who owned it. I could've kissed her when she told me that James Webb had worked for Clarence Monroe, Vivian's late husband, who'd owned and worked out of a nasty garage at the south end of town where the railroad depot used to be.

**T**he garage, one of a half dozen or so buildings on the wrong side of the railroad tracks, sat on a ruptured concrete slab near a small creek, among remnants of firetraps that had been bulldozed years before. It was a bulky, sooty building overgrown with so much kudzu it was barely recognizable as anything other than an eyesore.

A white Thunderbird was parked near the garage door, a huge sliding thing with a rusting handle. The door had been raised at least four feet off the ground, allowing a strip of waning daylight onto the stained cement floor.

- I did a sideways limbo beneath the door, ending up inside the dismal shell of a once thriving business. The place was surprisingly large, wide enough for five or six vehicles, and two hollow stories high. In a shadowy corner, parked on oily concrete next to a neglected truck bed, sat a black Cadillac DeVille, half covered in a piece of blue plastic too small to conceal the entire car.

I walked toward it cautiously, but she saw me coming. Vivian Monroe sat behind the wheel with the door open, her head against the steering wheel.

"Going somewhere?" I said.

She lifted her head toward me. "I wanted to help her; she'd had such a hard life. Her father was a good man, such a good man, but Edith's mother was a pill to live with. James would work late at night just to avoid going home to her." She spat out the words hurriedly as if they were tarnished.

"When Edith was born, she had some problems, and she didn't even graduate from high school. There was little money. Before James died, he asked me and Clarence to take care of her. She called me once, years later, needing money. You know what it was for? Food. I sent her five hundred dollars. After that, I felt responsible. She had no one else. We'd given James our word." She looked past the windshield.

"So you helped Edith bury John Burncastle in his own back yard."

"Edith said he was bent over laughing when she got angry and hit the back of his head. She did it with a skillet she found hanging



from a pot rack in the kitchen. She's not right—" Vivian hit the heel of her hand against the steering wheel "—but she could love, couldn't she? She loved him desperately. Who knew? I should've called the sheriff, but I couldn't. I couldn't do that and have Edith sit in a filthy jail. I gave my word."

"You're an accessory, Vivian, after the fact. But if you get a decent lawyer, you could make a deal and testify against Edith, get probation. In case you won't do that, the jury might take pity on you, find you a noble soul. I don't know about Edith."

She continued then in a tranquil, dignified voice as if she hadn't heard me. "I was so afraid the garden wouldn't look the same, that when his wife came back she would know, but . . . it snowed that night. I felt so lucky." She chuckled through a lone streaming tear. "Our first snow came early, just a dusting. It was just enough to freeze everything and cover the garden until . . ."

"Until Mrs. Burncastle had resigned herself to his leaving."

"She had to know what a scoundrel he was. I knew by the way he treated Twyla." She swung her head toward me, her gray eyes now sharp and threatening. "Twyla knows nothing about any of this, nothing about Edith . . ." She sobbed, then gained control. "His suitcases, the shovel, everything's in the trunk."

"Want me to drive you?"

Slowly she slid out of the car and stood, grasping my forearm. "I couldn't even tell Edith that Twyla

had given her the sweater, not even after we'd buried him. Twyla was only trying to do good. The whole thing just took a terrible turn, such a terrible, tangled . . ." She began sobbing then, uncontrollably.

I drove Vivian Monroe in my pickup to Don Earl's office and walked her inside, where the sheriff was having a take-out supper and a worried discussion on a black rotary phone. He put the receiver on its hook, closed a Styrofoam lid, and motioned me into his private office with a tilt of his hat.

Don Earl had left the door open, and I could hear Vivian sniffing in a vinyl chair around the corner while he told me that Mrs. Burncastle had confirmed the three gold crowns in her husband's dental work, as well as the bathrobe and the toupee. She had not seen her husband since last October, and as upset as she sounded over the phone, she was a shoo-in for his list of suspects.

That was when Vivian Monroe began confessing to the sheriff's staff, to a deputy and two secretaries and a woman who stood at the counter protesting an eviction notice. Don Earl gently grabbed Vivian's arm and pulled her into his office.

"I suppose Clifford'll have to find another house, what with all those police detectives swarming around the place now." Prudie staggered, uninvited, up from the service porch carrying a steaming dish of her Chicken Cordon Bluegrass. "I just can't believe Vivian Monroe

did that—and poor Edith Webb, taking out Dr. Burncastle in a fit of anger.” She reached my loft and stopped in her tracks, reproachfully inspecting the half-finished mint juleps on my dining room table and then me.

I tugged at my leather skirt, fingered the fur collar on the sweater Twyla had sold me. Clint, who looked like Clark Gable’s younger, blonder brother, reluctantly greeted her, eyebrows bristling.

“How ’bout a game of blackjack after we eat?” said Prudie, moving the mint juleps to make room for her platter.

“Boy, that sure smells good, Ms. Geasley, but . . . we have plans,”

said Clint, grabbing my hand. I followed his lead down the stairs.

Prudie stood watching us from the top, hands on hips. “Before dinner? Where?”

“We’re just going for a drive, maybe a movie,” said Clint.

“In that getup?” Prudie said to me.

I paused on the stairs, a balmy breeze wafting in from outside. “Don’t worry, Prudie, we’ll be back. Later.”

“Don’t trip over any dead bodies,” she called. We drove away in Clint’s ’71 Plymouth Barracuda convertible, top down.

It wasn’t a brand-new limousine, but it was close.

***Note to Our Readers:** If you have difficulty finding Alfred Hitchcock’s Mystery Magazine at your preferred retailer, we want to help. First, let the store manager know that you want the store to carry this magazine. Then send us a letter or postcard mentioning AHMM and giving us the full name and address of the store. Write to us at: Dell Magazines, Dept. NS, 6 Prowitt St., Norwalk, CT 06855-1220.*

MYSTERY CLASSIC

# GOD SEES THE TRUTH, BUT WAITS

Leo Tolstoy



Illustration by Tim Foley

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Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine 6/01

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**I**n the town of Vladimir lived a young merchant named Ivan Dmitritch Aksyonof. He had two shops and a house of his own.

Aksyonof was a handsome, fairhaired, curly-headed fellow, full of fun and very fond of singing. When quite a young man he had been given to drink, and was riotous when he had had too much, but after he married he gave up drinking, except now and then.

One summer Aksyonof was going to the Nizhny Fair, and as he bade goodbye to his family, his wife said to him, "Ivan Dmitritch, do not start today; I have had a bad dream about you."

Aksyonof laughed and said, "You are afraid that when I get to the fair I shall go on the spree."

His wife replied, "I do not know what I am afraid of; all I know is that I had a bad dream. I dreamt you returned from the town, and when you took off your cap, I saw that your hair was quite grey."

Aksyonof laughed. "That's a lucky sign," said he. "See if I don't sell out all my goods and bring you some presents from the fair."

So he said goodbye to his family and drove away.

When he had traveled halfway, he met a merchant whom he knew, and they put up at the same inn for the night. They had some tea together and then went to bed in adjoining rooms.

It was not Aksyonof's habit to sleep late, and wishing to travel while it was still cool, he aroused his driver before dawn and told him to put in the horses.

Then he made his way across to the landlord of the inn (who lived in a cottage at the back), paid his bill, and continued his journey.

When he had gone about twenty-five miles, he stopped for the horses to be fed. Aksyonof rested awhile in the passage of the inn; then he stepped out into the porch and, ordering a samovar to be heated, got out his guitar and began to play.

Suddenly a troika drove up with tinkling bells, and an official alighted followed by two soldiers. He came to Aksyonof and began to question him, asking him who he was and whence he came. Aksyonof answered him fully and said, "Won't you have some tea with me?" But the official went on cross-questioning him and asking him, "Where did you spend last night? Were you alone or with a fellow merchant? Did you see the other merchant this morning? Why did you leave the inn before dawn?"

Aksyonof wondered why he was asked all these questions, but he described all that had happened and then added, "Why do you cross-question me as if I were a thief or a robber? I am traveling on business of my own, and there is no need to question me." Then the official, calling the soldiers, said, "I am the police officer of this district, and I ques-

tion you because the merchant with whom you spent last night has been found with his throat cut. We must search your things."

They entered the house. The soldiers and the police officer unstrapped Aksyonof's luggage and searched it. Suddenly the officer drew a knife out of a bag, crying, "Whose knife is this?"

Aksyonof looked, and seeing a bloodstained knife taken from his bag, he was frightened.

"How is it there is blood on this knife?"

Aksyonof tried to answer but could hardly utter a word and only stammered, "I—I don't know—not mine."

Then the police officer said, "This morning the merchant was found in bed with his throat cut. You are the only person who could have done it. The house was locked from inside, and no one else was there. Here is this bloodstained knife in your bag, and your face and manner betray you! Tell me how you killed him and how much money you stole."

Aksyonof swore he had not done it; that he had not seen the merchant after they had had tea together; that he had no money except eight thousand rubles of his own; and that the knife was not his. But his voice was broken, his face pale, and he trembled with fear as though he were guilty.

The police officer ordered the soldiers to bind Aksyonof and to put him in the cart. As they tied his feet together and flung him into the cart, Aksyonof crossed himself and wept. His money and goods were taken from him, and he was sent to the nearest town and imprisoned there. Enquiries as to his character were made in Vladimir. The merchants and other inhabitants of that town said that in former days he used to drink and waste his time but that he was a good man. Then the trial came on; he was charged with murdering a merchant from Ryazan and robbing him of twenty thousand rubles.

His wife was in despair and did not know what to believe. Her children were all quite small; one was a baby at her breast. Taking them all with her, she went to the town where her husband was in jail. At first she was not allowed to see him, but, after much begging she obtained permission from the officials and was taken to him. When she saw her husband in prison dress and in chains, shut up with thieves and criminals, she fell down and did not come to her senses for a long time. Then she drew her children to her and sat down near him. She told him of things at home and asked about what had happened to him. He told her all, and she asked, "What can we do now?"

"We must petition the tsar not to let an innocent man perish."

His wife told him that she had sent a petition to the tsar but that it had not been accepted.

Aksyonof did not reply but only looked downcast.

Then his wife said, "It was not for nothing I dreamt your hair had turned grey. You remember? You should not have started that day." And passing her fingers through his hair, she said, "Vanya dearest, tell your wife the truth; was it not you who did it?"

"So you too suspect me!" said Aksyonof, and hiding his face in his hands, he began to weep. Then a soldier came to say that the wife and children must go away, and Aksyonof said goodbye to his family for the last time.

When they were gone, Aksyonof recalled what had been said, and when he remembered that his wife also had suspected him, he said to himself, It seems that only God can know the truth; it is to Him alone we must appeal, and from Him alone expect mercy.

And Aksyonof wrote no more petitions; gave up all hope, and only prayed to God.

Aksyonof was condemned to be flogged and sent to the mines. So he was flogged with a knout, and when the wounds made by the knout were healed, he was driven to Siberia with other convicts.

For twenty-six years Aksyonof lived as a convict in Siberia. His hair turned white as snow, and his beard grew long, thin, and grey. All his mirth went; he stooped; he walked slowly, spoke little, and never laughed, but he often prayed.

In prison Aksyonof learnt to make boots and earned a little money, with which he bought *The Lives of the Saints*. He read this book when there was light enough in the prison, and on Sundays in the prison church he read the lessons and sang in the choir, for his voice was still good.

The prison authorities liked Aksyonof for his meekness, and his fellow prisoners respected him: they called him "Grandfather" and "The Saint." When they wanted to petition the prison authorities about anything, they always made Aksyonof their spokesman, and when there were quarrels among the prisoners, they came to him to put things right and to judge the matter.

No news reached Aksyonof from his home, and he did not even know if his wife and children were still alive.

One day a fresh gang of convicts came to the prison. In the evening the old prisoners collected round the new ones and asked them what towns or villages they came from, and what they were sentenced for. Among the rest Aksyonof sat down near the newcomers and listened with downcast air to what was said.

One of the new convicts, a tall, strong man of sixty with a closely cropped grey beard was telling the others what he had been arrested for.



"Well, friends," he said, "I only took a horse that was tied to a sledge, and I was arrested and accused of stealing. I said I had only taken it to get home quicker and had then let it go; besides, the driver was a personal friend of mine. So I said, 'It's all right.' 'No,' said they, 'you stole it.' But how or where I stole it they could not say. I once really did something wrong and ought by rights to have come here long ago, but that time I was not found out. Now I have been sent here for nothing at all. . . . Eh, but it's lies I'm telling you; I've been to Siberia before, but I did not stay long."

"Where are you from?" asked someone.

"From Vladimir. My family are of that town. My name is Makar, and they also call me Semyonitch."

Aksyonof raised his head and said, "Tell me, Semyonitch, do you know anything of the merchants Aksyonof, of Vladimir? Are they still alive?"

"Know them? Of course I do. The Aksyonofs are rich, though their father is in Siberia, a sinner like ourselves, it seems! As for you, Gran'dad, how did you come here?"

Aksyonof did not like to speak of his misfortune. He only sighed and said, "For my sins I have been in prison these twenty-six years."

"What sins?" asked Makar Semyonitch.

But Aksyonof only said, "Well, well—I must have deserved it!" He would have said no more, but his companions told the newcomer how Aksyonof came to be in Siberia: how someone had killed a merchant and had put a knife among Aksyonof's things, and Aksyonof had been unjustly condemned.

When Makar Semyonitch heard this, he looked at Aksyonof, slapped his own knee, and exclaimed, "Well, this is wonderful! Really wonderful! But how old you've grown, Gran'dad!"

The others asked him why he was so surprised, and where he had seen Aksyonof before, but Makar Semyonitch did not reply. He only said, "It's wonderful that we should meet here, lads!"

These words made Aksyonof wonder whether this man knew who had killed the merchant, so he said, "Perhaps, Semyonitch, you have heard of that affair, or maybe you've seen me before?"

"How could I help hearing? The world's full of rumors. But it's long ago, and I've forgotten what I heard."

"Perhaps you heard who killed the merchant?" asked Aksyonof.

Makar Semyonitch laughed and replied, "It must have been him in whose bag the knife was found! If someone else hid the knife there, 'He's not a thief till he's caught,' as the saying is. How could anyone put a knife into your bag while it was under your head? It would surely have woken you up?"

When Aksyonof heard these words, he felt sure this was the man

who had killed the merchant. He rose and went away. All that night Aksyonof lay awake.

He felt terribly unhappy, and all sorts of images rose in his mind. There was the image of his wife as she was when he parted from her to go to the fair. He saw her as if she were present; her face and her eyes rose before him; he heard her speak and laugh. Then he saw his children, quite little as they were at that time: one with a little cloak on, another at his mother's breast. And then he remembered himself as he used to be—young and merry. He remembered how he sat playing the guitar in the porch of the inn where he was arrested, and how free from care he had been. He saw, in his mind, the place where he was flogged, the executioner, and the people standing around, the chains, the convicts, all the twenty-six years of his prison life, and his premature old age. The thought of it all made him so wretched that he was ready to kill himself.

And it's all that villain's doing! thought Aksyonof. And his anger was so great against Makar Semyonitch that he longed for vengeance, even if he himself should perish for it. He kept repeating prayers all night but could get no peace. During the day he did not go near Makar Semyonitch, nor even look at him.

A fortnight passed in this way. Aksyonof could not sleep at nights and was so miserable that he did not know what to do.

One night as he was walking about the prison he noticed some earth that came rolling out from under one of the shelves on which the prisoners slept. He stopped to see what it was. Suddenly Makar Semyonitch crept out from under the shelf, and looked up at Aksyonof with a frightened face. Aksyonof tried to pass without looking at him, but Makar seized his hand and told him that he had dug a hole under the wall, getting rid of the earth by putting it into his high boots and emptying it out every day on the road when the prisoners were driven to their work.

"Just you keep quiet, old man, and you shall get out, too. If you blab, they'll flog the life out of me, but I will kill you first."

Aksyonof trembled with anger as he looked at his enemy. He drew his hand away, saying, "I have no wish to escape, and you have no need to kill me; you killed me long ago! As to telling of you—I may do so or not as God shall direct."

Next day, when the convicts were led out to work, the convoy soldiers noticed that one or other of the prisoners emptied some earth out of his boots. The prison was searched and the tunnel found. The governor came and questioned all the prisoners to find out who had dug the hole. They all denied any knowledge of it. Those who knew would not betray Makar Semyonitch, knowing he would be flogged almost to death. At

last the governor turned to Aksyonof, whom he knew to be a just man, and said, "You are a truthful old man; tell me, before God, who dug the hole?"

Makar Semyonitch stood as if he were quite unconcerned, looking at the governor and not so much as glancing at Aksyonof. Aksyonof's lips and hands trembled; and for a long time he could not utter a word. He thought, Why should I screen him who ruined my life? Let him pay for what I have suffered. But if I tell, they will probably flog the life out of him, and maybe I suspect him wrongly. And after all, what good would it be to me?

"Well, old man," repeated the governor, "tell us the truth: who has been digging under the wall?"

Aksyonof glanced at Makar Semyonitch and said, "I cannot say, your honor. It is not God's will that I should tell! Do what you like with me; I am in your hands."

However much the governor tried, Aksyonof would say no more, and so the matter had to be left.

That night, when Aksyonof was lying on his bed and just beginning to doze, someone came quietly and sat down on his bed. He peered through the darkness and recognized Makar.

"What more do you want of me?" asked Aksyonof. "Why have you come here?"

Makar Semyonitch was silent. So Aksyonof sat up and said, "What do you want? Go away, or I will call the guard!"

Makar Semyonitch bent close over Aksyonof and whispered, "Ivan Dmitritch, forgive me!"

"What for?" asked Aksyonof.

"It was I who killed the merchant and hid the knife among your things. I meant to kill you, too, but I heard a noise outside, so I hid the knife in your bag and escaped out of the window."

Aksyonof was silent and did not know what to say. Makar Semyonitch slid off the bed-shelf and knelt upon the ground. "Ivan Dmitritch," said he, "forgive me! For the love of God, forgive me! I will confess that it was I who killed the merchant, and you will be released and can go to your home."

"It is easy for you to talk," said Aksyonof, "but I have suffered for you these twenty-six years. Where could I go to now? . . . My wife is dead, and my children have forgotten me. I have nowhere to go. . . ."

Makar Semyonitch did not rise but beat his head on the floor. "Ivan Dmitritch, forgive me!" he cried. "When they flogged me with the knout, it was not so hard to bear as it is to see you now . . . yet you had pity on me, and did not tell. For Christ's sake forgive me, wretch that I am!" And he began to sob.

When Aksyonof heard him sobbing, he too began to weep.

"God will forgive you!" said he. "Maybe I am a hundred times worse than you." And at these words his heart grew light, and the longing for home left him. He no longer had any desire to leave the prison, but only hoped for his last hour to come.

In spite of what Aksyonof had said, Makar Semyonitch confessed his guilt. But when the order for his release came, Aksyonof was already dead.

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### **SOLUTION TO THE MAY "UNSOLVED":**

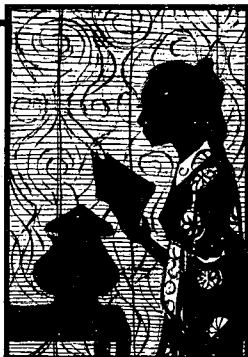
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The druglord posing as a writer is using the name Andy Tyler. His wife calls herself Dolly. They are in cottage number 4.

| COTTAGE | HUSBAND AND WIFE     | HAIR   | PROFESSION  |
|---------|----------------------|--------|-------------|
| 1       | Dan and Betsy Queen  | blonde | contractor  |
| 2       | Bill and Carol Unser | red    | electrician |
| 3       | Gus and Ellen Smith  | dark   | architect   |
| 4       | Andy and Dolly Tyler | blonde | "writer"    |
| 5       | Fred and Alice Roche | dark   | mason       |
| 6       | Chet and Gigi Orson  | red    | plumber     |
| 7       | Earl and Flora Purdy | blonde | carpenter   |

# BOOKED & PRINTED

Mary Cannon



**A**n amiable protagonist, exotic settings, an intriguing scientific premise, and a labyrinthine plot all play a part in Hector Macdonald's notable first novel, **The Mind Game** (Ballantine, \$24.95). With the encouragement of his celebrated, iconoclastic Oxford tutor, graduate student Ben Ashurst agrees to participate in a groundbreaking study of human emotions. For his time and trouble Ben and his captivating, impetuous new girlfriend, Cara, will be treated to a first-class stay at a posh private resort on the coast of Kenya over the winter holidays. I won't spoil things by telling you what happens next, but you can guess that the experiment turns out to be more than Ben had bargained for. In the fashion of espionage novelists, Macdonald endows his tale with more layers than your average onion, then wraps it up in a neat conspiracy package. It's great fun getting to the heart of this story.

Dr. Sylvia Strange, a forensic psychiatrist with expertise in criminal sexuality, returns in **Dantes' Inferno** (Simon & Schuster, \$24), Sarah Lovett's fourth entry in this series. Brilliant, self-styled anarchist and terrorist bomber John Dantes is finally behind bars when another bomb goes off in the City of Angels. Dr. Strange, who's been allowed to visit Dantes to perform an evaluation, is convinced he's not the bomber but that he knows who is behind this latest disaster. Lovett has jam-packed this novel with psychologically complex people, lots of research on bomb making and the layout and history of Los Angeles, and enough action to raise more than a few hairs on readers' necks. I would bet that fans of Jeffery Deaver's Lincoln Rhyme novels and Thomas Harris's Hannibal Lecter books will also enjoy this one for the unusual relationships Lovett creates among her major characters (especially be-

tween villain and heroine), the forensic detail she has included, and the chilling suspense.

On an entirely calmer note is Margot Wadley's **The Gripping Beast** (Thomas Dunne, \$21.95). Young American Isabel Garth comes to northern Scotland's Orkney Islands on a pilgrimage. She has lately lost her father to illness, and this small island community was his boyhood home. She brings her sketchpad, the name of one of her father's childhood friends who has invited her to visit, and a lively interest in the rich history of the place. But from the moment she steps off the ferry, Isabel's visit seems cursed. She has come too late to meet the old man who knew her dad, she senses that she is being followed, and she seems to be the unlucky—and ultimately, as the accidents pile up, the unlikely—victim of ill chance. Wadley paints a pleasing picture of the Orkneys; a strong sense of place and several likable characters compensate for the relaxed pace of her plot.

Author Margaret Miles takes readers of **A Mischief in the Snow** (Bantam, \$5.99) all the way back to the year 1766 and the small village of Bracebridge, Massachusetts. It's January and the creek should have been frozen solid enough for young widow Charlotte Willett to enjoy her ice-skating adventure. Alas, it wasn't. After a near-fatal accident, Charlotte seeks help at the mansion in the center of the marsh, and two elderly women who live as recluses on lonely Boar Island offer her warmth and dry clothing. When the sole villager with any connections to the place dies violently, Charlotte begins her quiet investigation. Miles deftly weaves period detail and historical events into the mystery plot and the subplots, while throwing in a dash of romance and the mores of male-female interactions for spice. Fans of historical mysteries should certainly be happy with this one.

Mike Stewart's **Sins of the Brother** (Berkley Prime Crime, \$5.99) is out in paperback, and it's worth looking up in your local bookstore. Young attorney Tom McInnes reluctantly returns to his Alabama hometown when his ne'er-do-well brother, Hall, is murdered. At first, he agrees to stay for a few days to look into Hall's death as a favor to his father. Soon, however, Tom finds himself in the hot seat so recently vacated by Hall—the powerful people who were after something Hall had stolen are now coming after Tom. Worse, Tom isn't exactly getting the kind of help he's looking for from the other good old boys and girls in Cooper's Bend, including the sheriff, Hall's girlfriend, the hired man who practically raised both boys, and even his own father. Stewart puts an average guy in a series of deadly situations and arms him with a quick wit and a resourceful, loyal sidekick. The result is a roller-coaster ride with heart.

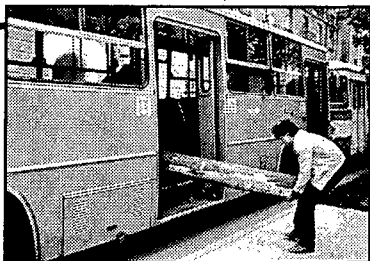
The estimable Jeffery Deaver has a new novel out with a fresh set of characters; anyone with any interest in computers should, as I did, find

*(continued on page 142)*



# THE STORY THAT WON

The January Mysterious Photograph contest was won by Mark Truman of Tustin, California. Honorable mentions go to William F. Smith of Garden Grove, California; Frank Peirce of College Station, Texas; James Hagerty of Melbourne, Florida; Jan Streilein of



Aiken, South Carolina; Carolyn Ostrom of Arlington, Virginia; Lorna M. Kaine of Oviedo, Florida; Benjamin H. Foreman of Harbor Oaks, Florida; Mark Barstead of Toronto, Ontario, Canada; and Ila Winslow of Portland, Oregon.

## LUMBERING IDIOT by Mark Truman

The plaintiff's attorney leaned aggressively against the barrier separating him from Rob Pine. George Oaks smiled sympathetically at the jury before turning to Rob in the witness box to ask his next question.

"Mr. Pine, do you believe yourself to be of sound mind?"

The defense table erupted. Joe Sapp barked at the judge, "Objection. How can a man ever answer that and know if he's telling the truth or not?"

"Sustained. Ask something else."

"For what reason did you load a twelve foot tree trunk into the bus you used to drive for a living?"

Rob shrugged. "My supervisor suggested I always have a log with me." The courtroom audience filled with giggles and snickers. The judge pounded his gavel for order.

Oaks grabbed a piece of paper and held it up to the judge. "This is an itemized list of damages caused by the log to the carpeting and other parts of the bus. Mr. Pine can certainly be held responsible for the damages. I have no further questions."

Mr. Sapp stood up and strutted confidently across the room. "Mr. Pine, did you take a circular saw into your bus and cut up the log in question?"

"Yes, I did."

"Tell the court why." Sapp oozed confidence.

"People were just getting on the bus. A gentleman at the entrance shouted out his unfortunate choice of words: 'All aboard.'"

*(continued from page 140)*

**The Blue Nowhere** (Simon & Schuster, \$26) irresistible. This thriller is marked by Deaver's ingenious plot turns, the breakneck pace of the conflict, and the precise technical detail that supports the premise. As is the case in Deaver's other novels, readers are introduced to a colorful, memorable cast of characters, including a hero with whom we quickly empathize. The locale is Silicon Valley; the villain is a brilliant, sociopathic computer hacker who goes by the code name PHATE. The hacker initially stalks his victims and then, using his computer genius and his own personal program, manipulates them into their individualized death scenes. Just as the head of the LAPD Computer Crimes division springs convicted hacker Wyatt Gillette so he can consult on the case, a surprise attack rearranges all the major players. Great computer stuff, an uncanny (and nearly unstoppable) villain, a good-guy team to root for, and a nerve-wracking secret revealed only in the final moments—what else does a great thriller need?

In Thomas Zigal's **Pariah** (Dell, \$5.99), the town of Aspen, Colorado, is front and center in the story. The novel's opening finds Kurt Muller, Aspen's sheriff, uncomfortably dressed in a rented tuxedo as wealthy women make bids for a date with the eligible divorcé. Kurt is facing a voter recall, so his buddy talked him into this charity gig in order to gain some support from the town's wealthy sector. The successful bidder is the beautiful and reclusive Nicole Bauer, an heiress once accused of pushing her rockstar boyfriend off the deck of her chalet. But driving off with her is probably not going to win Kurt any much-needed votes. Nicole wants to revive a brief, secret affair they'd had the year before. She also is very scared. She claims that the dead lover has threatened her life. Kurt soon finds himself in the midst of a hunt for a crazed killer, and his probing reaches back some twenty years into the surprisingly wild youth of a few noted Aspen residents. The case dovetails with a fateful struggle for both his career and the continued shared custody of his young son. A lot of bang for the buck in this one.

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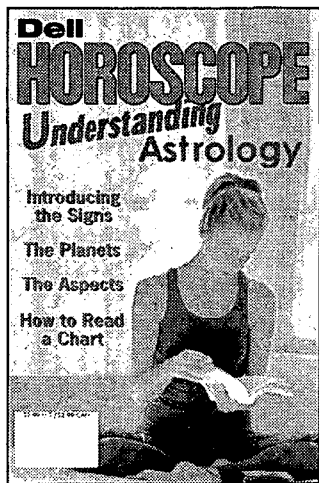
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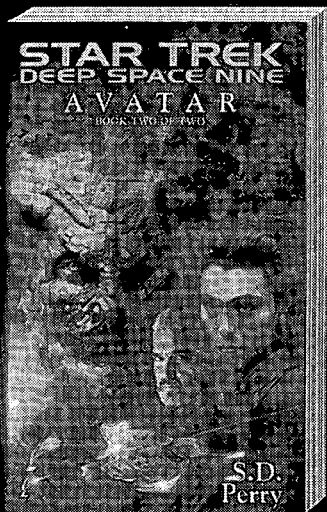
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